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THE 1800'S "NEW ISRAELITES"

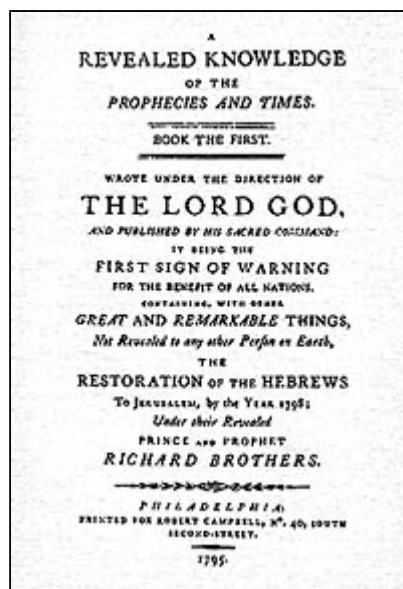
Richard Brothers, the Woods, the Cowderys, and M. M. Noah



Early Nineteenth Century American Freemasons in Ritualistic Israelite Garb

[British Israelites](#) | [The Wood Scrape](#) | [M. M. Noah's Israelite Gathering](#) | [Mormon Israelites](#)
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The New Israelites:
Part 1 (pre-1800)
Richard Brothers and British Israeliteism



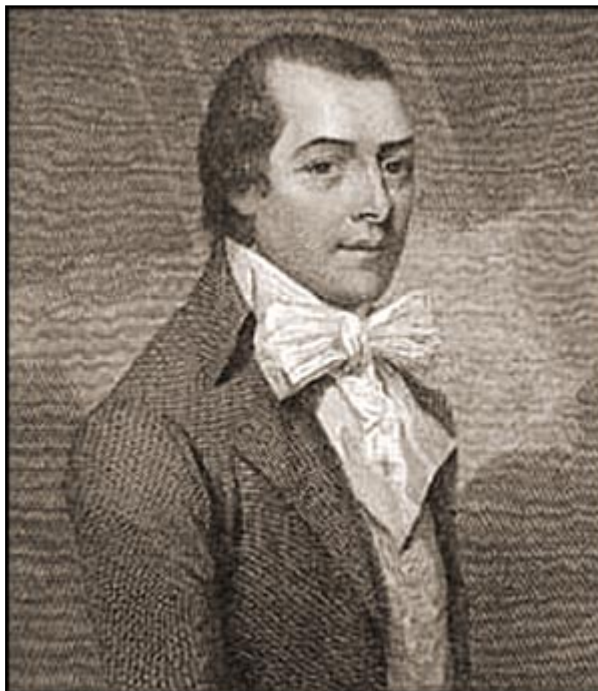
PREFACE

(from [Richard Brothers'](#) 1795
A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies...)

WHEN I was commanded to write the Chronology of the World, I was immediately after influenced by Revelation how; without which I could not, nor could any other Man on the face of the Earth with certainty, however eminent for Wisdom and Learning he might be; after it was done, the LORD GOD said to me in a vision at night, -- that is the true age of the World, and the generally computed one is erroneous.

As the SCRIPTURE is the only great fountain of Knowledge, or Book of written Truth in the World; as it contains the sacred Records of those things which GOD has pre-determined shall be hereafter -- as well as those which have been already; and as it contains the history of our own Creation, with that of every living thing besides, it alone, in preference to any man's opinion, ought to be, without the least doubt, freely believed and confidentially depended upon.

Although I am enabled, from revealed knowledge, to write, considerably more than what this Book contains, and which in Justice to the Divine Spirit of truth from whom it flows, ought to be believed; yet GOD, who instructs me in all Things, that I may shew an example of precision to the learned, and be admired for it by the wife; that I may give instruction to the poor, and demonstrate the certainty of what I do write to every Man that has the least knowledge of his Creator, commands me to additionally seal its Truth by that great testimony of *scriptural evidence* which no nation can deny, and which no human arguments can oppose.



Richard Brothers, the British Prophet (1757-1824)

Therefore, having Authority, I proceed through the Scripture, regularly uncovering, by revealed knowledge as I go, its sacred Records WHICH HAVE BEEN PRESERVED FOR ME, holding each one up for public view, beautiful and clear to the open mind; that all men may behold and examine them, that all men may perceive their truth, and admire at this late hour of the world, not only what was wrote by Daniel at Babylon, EXPLAINED IN LONDON, but likewise a familiar communication of REVEALED KNOWLEDGE...

The remainder of this section is still under construction

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American Israelites: Part 2 (1795-1810)



The Nathaniel Wood Cult and American Israelitism

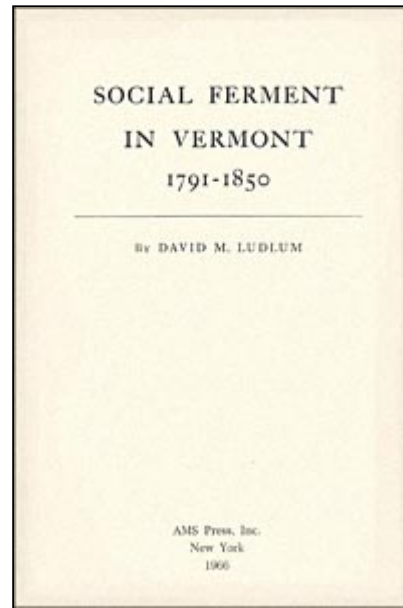
[1828 Vermont American](#)
[1867 History of Middletown](#)
[1879 "St. John's Rod"](#)
[1881 Rev. Myrick sermon](#)
[1886 History of Rutland Co.](#)
[1888 Naked Truths...](#)
[1895 Jefferson Co., NY](#)
[1898 Jefferson Co., NY](#)
[1939 Social Ferment in Vt.](#)

[1972 Marvin Hill's Review](#)
[1982 Radical Sects... New Eng.](#)
[1984 "Mature Joseph Smith..."](#)
[1985 J. S. & Origins of Bk. of Mor.](#)
[1987 Early Mormonism & Magic](#)
[1994 The Refiners Fire...](#)
[1996 Early Mormon Docs. vol. I](#)
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SOCIAL ARCHITECTS

(pp. 238-244 of Chapter Eight in
David M. Ludlum's 1939
Social Ferment in Vermont 1791-1850)



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Through all the currents of social agitation of the early nineteenth century appeared a constant reiteration of a belief in the nearness of a millennial society. The vision of a free man inhabiting a free world has engaged the attention of aspiring souls in all ages and dimes. The back country of early America, stretching from interior New England across New York State and into the Ohio Valley, gave birth to numerous prophets and messiahs who aimed at being the architects and builders of a new social order. The communities among the Green Mountains produced their portion of these Utopians and gave an enthusiastic hearing to their variform plans.

The chief actors in the contemplated reorganization of the American way of life fall into two categories in accordance with the mainspring of their thinking. In the first place, there were those who ran to an evangelical pattern and sought a return to the first principles of the Scriptures. The revivals of 1800-1837 had restored the Bible to a high place; to many it was the sole guide for the conduct of life. Accordingly, they felt it their imperative duty to realize the prophecies outlined in the Books of Daniel and Revelation. On the other hand, there were non-religious social planners whose approach was rationalistic. Following the trends of the popular natural-rights philosophy, they set out to discover the

natural laws of social organization and to create a system of living guided by blueprints of their own fashioning. These two groups were mutually hostile, the one placing faith in the supernatural, the other in material means.

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Nevertheless, their objectives were the same, and Vermonters lent receptive ears to each.

RELIGIOUS MILLENNIALISTS

There are records of several attempts to form a more perfect society in Vermont, and there must have been others which have passed into limbo. One of the first instances occurred in the latter 1790's on the Massachusetts border. A former English army officer by the name of Dorril brought together a circle of followers from Leyden in the Bay State and from Guilford in Vermont. Claiming to be a prophet of God through whom revelations were to be made, he set up a religio-political organization of unique character.¹ Unfortunately, few details of the actual working of this social economy have been preserved. A communism of property existed but no democracy; Dorril appears to have insisted on complete obedience to his divinely inspired commands. He enforced a strict vegetarianism on his followers, and even refused to allow them to don clothes which had been produced at the expense of life. Leather shoes were taboo, woolen foot coverings being the mode. The Dorrilites, so the rumor ran, frequently gathered for bacchanalian revels and thus aroused the suspicions of their neighbors. Joseph Lathrop, a distinguished clergyman of Springfield, Massachusetts, brought this singular sect into prominence by publicly castigating it in one of his tirades against the infidelities of the age.

In the northern part of this State, I am well informed, there has lately appeared, and still exists, under a licentious leader, a company of beings, who discard the principles of religion, and obligations of morality, trample on the bonds of matrimony, the separate rights of property, and the laws of civil society, spend the Sabbath in labor or diversion, as fancy dictates, and the nights in riotous excess and promiscuous concubinage,

¹ Material on the Dorrilites is limited: *Federal Galaxy* (Brattleboro), January 15, 1799; *National Philanthropist* (Boston), August 3, 1827; Thompson, *History of Vermont*, II, 203.

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as lust impels. Their number consists of about forty, some of whom are people of respectable abilities and once, of decent characters. A society of this description, would disgrace the natives of Caffraria. ²

The Reverend Lathrop believed the Dorrilites a manifestation of the Devil, failing to recognize that they were merely trying to conform to their interpretation of Biblical injunction. Like all single-purposed individuals, however, they ultimately took flight on wings of fancy that led to their undoing. One day Dorril announced to his disciples his immunity from pain as an illustration of his God-given powers. Captain Ezekiel Foster, not a member of the company, was drawn to a meeting by his curiosity and there challenged the leader's pretension that "no arm can hurt my flesh." Stepping forward, the Captain delivered a well-aimed blow on the prophet's chin and floored him. Upon being knocked down a second time, Dorril pleaded with Foster to desist. The latter agreed to stop his iconoclastic offensive if his adversary would acknowledge the pain so evident on his face and disclaim any further supernatural powers. With the puncturing of their leader's invulnerability, the Dorrilites dispersed. Nevertheless, a residue of susceptibility to religious excitement remained in the region, as was attested in later years by the occurrence of vigorous religious revivals and a strong attachment to the doctrine of the Second Advent.

Among the amalgam that populated the valleys of western Vermont another outburst of fanaticism arose. **In 1799 a mysterious fellow by the name of Winchell came to Middletown** in Rutland County and took up a secretive residence on an out-lying farm, where he was suspected of being a fugitive from a counterfeiting indictment in Orange County. ³ Presently his

² Joseph Lathrop, *A Sermon on the Dangers of the Times from Infidelity and Immorality; especially from a lately discovered conspiracy against Religion and Government* (Springfield, Mass., 1798), p. 14.

³ Source material on this incident is contained in Barnes Frisbie, *History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, 1867), pp. 46-64; reminiscences of the affair appear in *Vermont American* (Middlebury), [May 7](#) and [August 6, 1828](#).

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money-making propensities appeared in a different form; he became a rodsman, one of those gifted frontier characters claiming an ability to discover hidden wealth by the use of a divining rod, usually a stick of witch hazel. During a year's stay in the vicinity Winchell duped many of his neighbors into contributing funds to finance his treasure hunts. Just as each cache was to be uncovered some slight incident occurred to break the mysterious spell.

While at Middletown, Winchell made the acquaintance of **Nathaniel Wood**, who has been described by the historian of Middletown "as dishonest and unscrupulous in matters of religion as any modern politician has been in politics."⁴ **Wood was one of those defiant Separates of Connecticut who had sought a haven for his unorthodox beliefs in the free air of the Green Mountains.** But even in a region given to radicalism Wood stood out from his fellows. In 1789 he was excommunicated from the local Congregational Society for "saying one thing and doing the contrary and persisting in contention."⁵ He was therefore forced to organize his own religious sect around the nucleus of his large family. In Winchell's magical powers Wood saw a powerful instrument. Accordingly the divining rod became St. John's rod, and the whole business of the money digging took on an air of revelation and evangelism. The Middletown preacher shortly became conscious of divine inspiration revealed through the rod and commenced to issue pontifical pronouncements which were taken as Gospel truth by his followers. Believers began to exhibit signs of fanaticism under the spell of their faith in the nearness of the Almighty. On one occasion two young ladies felt the presence of the Devil in their clothing; fleeing on a cold night, they threw off their garments and sped naked over the snow to the summit of a near-by mountain to which the rod guided. The frenzy caused by Wood's frequent prophecies increased

⁴ Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, p. 45.

⁵ Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont*, II, 200 [not in 1853 ed.?].

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during the last days of 1800. His wrath against **the Gentiles (all those who were skeptical of his disclosures)** mounted with each taunt hurled at him.

In a short time the announcement came forth that the catastrophe predicted in the Book of Revelation was near. On the fourteenth of January, 1801, God would send a great earthquake and all the unregenerate and their worldly goods would be destroyed. As the appointed time approached, signs were put on the doors of believers in anticipation of the heavenly visitation. The more staid residents of Middletown gave little credence to the local soothsayer, but on the fateful night the authorities called out the militia in the fear that some "destroying Angel" in his mad delusion might do bodily harm to a Gentile. The night passed but neither angel nor earth tremor approached. The Wood Scrape, as the incident was called, is indicative of the belief latent among the religious that the Day of Judgment was not far distant, and it demonstrated the ease with which subtle propagandists claiming divine inspiration could excite the credulous. Another significant aspect of the affair lay in its alleged inspiration of Mormonism. Winchell and Oliver Cowdry, a son of a prominent actor in the Wood Scrape, subsequently moved from Middletown to Palmyra in New York State and there became acquainted with another transplanted Vermont rodsman, Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism.⁶ The strands of connection between the Wood Scrape and the Palmyra outcroppings are too tenuous to withstand historical criticism. Nevertheless the two incidents suggest similar social tendencies in the soil of these two "infected districts."

Another group of religious primates appeared in the Green Mountain region in 1817, a year of widespread revivals following

⁶ The historian of Middletown was convinced of an intimate connection. "...it is my honest belief that this Wood movement here in Middletown was one source, if not the main source, from which came this monster -- Mormonism." Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, p. 64.

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in the wake of a series of economic catastrophes.⁷ [Designated Pilgrims](#), they had their origin in Lower Canada near the forks of the St. Francis River, a region forming an extension of the cultural pattern of northern Vermont. In their retreat from a hostile environment the Pilgrims sought an earthly salvation

in a return to a Biblical way of life. Bullard, their leader, like many other religious prophets, had suffered a long illness and upon recovery determined to devote himself to the service of Christ. He commenced preaching and soon gathered a following. In their search for the Promised Land the Pilgrims journeyed southward, finally coming to rest at South Woodstock where they gained proselytes to their faith.⁸ In tune with the monarchical tendencies of these theocratic communities Bullard became a spiritual and secular dictator and commanded even the personal property of all converts. His fervent desire to return to first principles led him to pay little heed to historical evolution; he ordered his disciples to discard the ornaments of civilization and to clothe themselves in bear skins and leather girdles. By order of their leader the men shaved the upper lip but not the chin. The most notable characteristic was filth, to them a cardinal virtue. Finding no Scriptural command to wash, they never bathed, but delighted in rolling around in the thick dust which covers Vermont by-roads in summertime. To the relief of local religious bodies, they departed the Woodstock district in the fall of 1817, but not without close to a hundred converts, one of whom had formerly been a Methodist preacher.

The Pilgrims turned southward then westward in search of their Promised Land. They were reported in Troy, N. Y., Sussex, N.J., Cincinnati, Ohio, and New Madrid, Mo., where Bullard

⁷ Thompson, *History of Vermont*, II, 203.

⁸ Henry S. Lee, *Uncommon Vermont* (Rutland, 1926), p. 198; William H. Tucker, *History of Hartford, Vermont* (Burlington, 1889), p. 271, speaks of "Puritans" in Hartford "around 1820." It would seem that the Pilgrims and Puritans were the same,

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finally lost his charm and the pilgrimage appears to have ended.⁹ At a New York village they were interviewed by Ira Chase, a Baptist elder, who reported that their leader was a red-bearded giant who "rules the whole company as an absolute monarch in all things spiritual and secular." When questioned closely about his tenets, the leader ordered silence, then "he and some of the others, poured forth upon both of us, a torrent of abuse, such as surpassed all that may be heard in a grog shop, from the lowest of the profane rabble, when ministers of the Gospel are made the theme of derision."¹⁰ The Pilgrims represented an

extreme expression of the fundamentalist spirit dominating religious men of the early nineteenth century.

The greatest of the Vermont prophets was John Humphrey Noyes, born in 1807 in the valley of Federalism and Congregationalism, in conservative Brattleboro. The history of the development of the Noyesian theology of Perfectionism at the Putney Community in Windham County and its further expansion at Oneida in New York State is a fascinating story, one which has been told many times of late and told well.¹¹ Therefore, it will be pertinent to confine attention to the philosophical basis of the movement and to examine its relationship to the contemporary world.

The focal point of Perfectionism was the belief that Christ had already reappeared on earth and that the reign of the Second Kingdom had commenced...

⁹ *Budget* (Troy, N. Y.), and *Register* (Sussex, N. J.) quoted in *American Yeoman* (Brattleboro), October 14, 1817; *Cincinnati Bee* quoted in *North Star* (Danville), May 22, 1818.

¹⁰ Letter of Ira Chase, Clarksburgh, Va., January 6, 1818, in *The American Baptist Magazine* (New York), May 1818, pp. 341-44.

¹¹ Two works by George W. Noyes are practically source books of information about his ancestor's career: *Religious Experiences of John Humphrey Noyes* (New York, 1923), and *John Humphrey Noyes, The Putney Community* (Oneida, 1931). Pierpoint Noyes has written a penetrating appraisal of his father's later life: *My Father's House* (New York, 1937). The best of the biographies is Robert A. Parker, *A Yankee Saint, John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York, 1935).

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...Another religious millennial philosophy winning attention in Vermont was [Swedenborgianism](#). Its founder, an eighteenth-century mystic of Scandinavian birth, after a long career of scientific investigation turned his speculations on the relation between God and man. With the details of his creed we are not concerned. Suffice it to say that he possessed extraordinary visionary powers, claimed to have witnessed the Last Judgment and to be in communication with the Lord.¹⁹ In the decade of the 1840's Swedenborgianism experienced as great a popularity with the intelligentsia as Second Adventism exerted among the ignorant. Here at last, they thought, was a religion with a scientific basis,

for Swedenborg tried to establish the nexus between the spiritual and material worlds. Brook Farmers embraced the enticing philosophy, hailing it as the complement, in the religious field, of Fourierism in the field of social economy. The foremost popularizer of this "scientific religion" was a Vermonter, Professor George Bush of Norwich, long a teacher of Hebrew at New York University.²⁰ At this time Swedenborgianism was rather an intellectual hobby than an organized sect. Nevertheless, a considerable disturbance developed at Cambridge, Vermont, when the local pastor, John Truair, became a convert to the new doctrine. Dismissed from the Association, Truair formed the Union Church of Cambridge to harbor like-minded souls.²¹ Swedenborgianism, like all other movements of the age which aimed at creating the universal church predicted in the Scriptures, resulted only in the formation of another new sect, the

¹⁹ Alexander J. Grieve, "Swedenborg," *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (4th edition, London and New York, 1929), XXI, 653.

²⁰ Harris E. Starr, "George Bush," *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1929), III, 347.

²¹ *American Quarterly Register* (Boston), November, 1841, p. 130.

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[Church of New Jerusalem](#), to further complicate the schisms of Protestantism.

Of the galaxy of prophets and messiahs appearing in the American firmament in the 1830's and 1840's none achieved greater success and more lasting fame than the founder and the organizer of Mormonism. Vermont played an important role in the rise of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Joseph Smith was born at Sharon in 1805, Brigham Young at Whitingham in 1801.²² The story of the miraculous finding of the Book of Mormon, the courageous trek Westward, and the successful establishment of the State of Deseret in the Far West lies beyond the scope of this essay. Mormonism, though castigated by the orthodox of Vermont on all occasions, continued to draw recruits from the native state of its founders. In 1835 two missionaries of the new faith were reported in Montpelier where their sober preaching aroused commendation

among those mindful of the extravagant conduct of more "respectable" revivalists.²³ The Census of 1850 reported two hundred and thirty-two Vermonters residing in Utah, all of them presumably Mormons and participants in building the most successful of all the American communisms.²⁴

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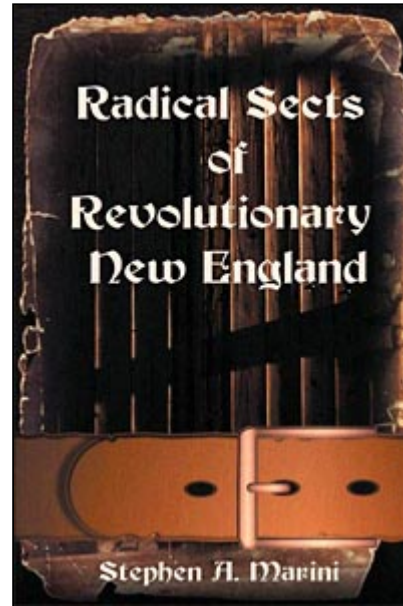
²² Bernard De Voto, "Joseph Smith," Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1935), XVII, 310; De Voto, "Brigham Young," *ibid.*, XX, 620.

²³ Vermont Patriot (Montpelier), July 13, 1835.

²⁴ United States Census Office, Statistical View of the United States . . . 1850, p.ii6.

THE NEW LIGHT STIR

(excerpts from Chapter Three in
Stephen A. Marini's 1982
Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England)



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[p. 40]

The most important religious event in rural New England during the Revolution was a revival that swept across the hill country and maritime Canada between 1776 and 1783...

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The New Light Stir thus was predominantly a Radical Evangelical event, and as such it reflected the Whitefieldian themes of the New Birth, charismatic gifts, separation from the world, and the gathered church. But above all the rural revivalists seized on millennialism and perfectionism as vehicles of persuasion. Belief in the imminent Second Coming of Christ and the concomitant search for complete sanctification among the "saved remnant" in the Last Days were irresistible and effective themes for evangelists responding to revolutionary "wars and rumors of war."

Congregationalist divines also proclaimed "the promised day of the Lord," but there was a significant and revealing difference between the two visions of the future. The Congregationalist view, typified by Ezra Stiles's [1783 sermon](#) *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, focused on America as the [chosen](#)

[nation of God](#), blessed by the Lord with millennial holiness, virtue, prosperity, and empire. Proceeding from this endorsement and support of the Revolution, Congregationalists articulated a sanguine expectation for an earthly millennial kingdom in America. ²⁴ Radical Evangelicals, on the other hand, held to the notion that war confirmed human sinfulness and depravity and that the revival itself signaled the speedy end of history and the imminent establishment of the otherworldly kingdom of the New Jerusalem.

It was a conflict between premillennialism and postmillennialism --

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whether the thousand-year reign of the saints would precede or follow the cataclysmic Second Coming of Christ. The rural saints of the New Light Stir were certain that their reign would commence only after the imminent return of Christ, and instead of finding hope and solace in America's military triumph they sought "the signs of the times" in political events and natural omens to discern the moment of millennial dawn.

One such event -- the [Dark Day of 1780](#) -- occurred about midway through the Stir and served to drive it to new heights of chiliastic fervor. On 19 May 1780, from early morning on the Hudson Valley to mid-afternoon as far east as Casco Bay, Maine, all of New England was plunged into an eerie and profound darkness. At Worcester, "the Obscurity was so great that those who had good eyesight could scarcely see to read common print... The impact of Dark Day was electric: To the already indubitable millennial signs of war and revival, God had added yet another through dramatic natural omens... It is not recollected from History... that a darkness of equal Intensity & Duration has ever happened in any parts of the world, except in Egypt, and at the miraculous Eclipse at the Crucifixion... New England might soon see the climax of the divine drama begun with Exodus and the Crucifixion... that we may be filled with reverential awe of the divine majesty...

[transcriber's editorial insertion -- cf 3 Nephi, pp. 471-2, Book of Mormon, 1830 ed.: "And it came to pass that there was thick darkness upon all the face of the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof which had not fallen, could feel the vapour of darkness; and there could be no light... and there was not any light seen, neither fire, nor glimmer, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars, for so great were the mists of darkness which were upon the face of the land. And it came to

pass that it did last for the space of three days, that there was no light seen; and there was great mourning, and howling, and weeping among all the people continually; yea, great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them. And in one place they were heard to cry, saying: O that we had repented before this great and terrible day..."]

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The Come-Outers, Merry Dancers, and New Lebanon New Lights illustrated the process of sect development on the northern frontier. Renewed religious concern, a rapid influx of settlers, and returning veterans created unstable socioreligious conditions, characterized by mounting division between New Lights and Old Lights. When revival struck in such circumstances, institutional fluidity permitted swift growth of heterodox doctrine and charismatic experience. Young men and women emerged as sectarian leaders on the basis of their extraordinary gifts while millennial expectation, new communal identity, and Old Light opposition kept revival at fever pitch. Typically these sectarian movements rose to a paroxysm of ecstatic deviance —chiliasm, orgiastic purification, violence. These episodes often passed quickly, leaving the sects in an ambiguous position that they resolved by either returning to the larger community or remaining apart in a kind of spiritual limbo, awaiting "further light."

Sectarian localism continued to flourish along with sporadic revivals until 1800 and beyond. The Dorrellites, for example, were a community of perfectionists that arose in the Yorker communities of Guilford, Vermont, and Leyden and Bernardston, Massachusetts, in the late eighteenth century. The leader of the sect was [William Dorrell](#), a Tory who fought with Burgoyne at Saratoga. Upon returning to Vermont after the war, he received

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a visionary commission to prophesy and exhort sinners to perfection. But it was not until about 1794 that Dorrell proclaimed his own immortality and physical invulnerability. His preaching soon thereafter drew a number of converts who "discarded all revelations except what their leader received." [45]

The group adopted a semicomunal social organization, living in close proximity on contiguous farms. Dorrell demanded firm discipline from his followers, including "no eating or use of anything at the expense of life." Such strict discipline contrasted with the excess of Dorrellite public worship, which

attracted "some very respectable families from all neighboring towns" to meetings for "eating, drinking, singing and dancing, and hearing lectures" from the prophet. Dorrell's teaching seems to have been a sort of pentecostal Deism: The prophet attributed his revelations not to God or Christ, but "the light of nature." Followers apparently took his visionary experiences to be a heightened form of natural perception, a belief that implied a human capacity to transcend physical laws when empowered by God. [46]

The Dorrellites flourished for several years before the prophet was publicly disgraced in 1798. When Dorrell announced at a meeting that "no man can harm me," an outraged visitor assaulted him, bloodying his nose. Bereft in the most dramatic way of his principal claim, Dorrell nonetheless was able to hold together a small group of believers into the nineteenth century. In 1802 members of the sect still lived together on Frizzel Hill in Guilford, continuing to "speak as though they meant to go to hell, sooner than obey the teaching of any man which comes outside of the revelation of God they pretend to have themselves." [47]

A different pattern of local sectarianism appeared in the rise of the **New Israelites of Middletown, Vermont**. This community was inspired by Nathaniel Wood, a Separate from Norwich, Connecticut, who was one of Middletown's original settlers, and sire of its leading family. During the 1780s Wood's sons, Jacob, Ephraim, and Nathaniel, served the new settlement in most elective capacities including state representative, justice of the peace, and selectman. The Woods also had been prominent in the founding of the Middletown Congregationalist Church in 1780, but nine years later Nathaniel Wood was expelled for censoriousness and heterodoxy. "He had gotten up a new system of religious doctrine, and seemed determined it should prevail at all events." His three sons and their families allied with the patriarch and withdrew from the church. [48 Lee, *Uncommon Vermont*, p. 190]

The new family sect soon assumed a menacing tone, pronouncing "supernatural agencies and special judgments of God" on local citizens. This defensive posture was elaborated into theological terms with "Priest" Woods's assertion that **his followers were "modern Israelites or Jews**, who were under the special guardianship of the Almighty while the Gentiles -- all who were opposed to them -- would suffer from their hostility." For about ten years Priest Wood and his **New Israelites** adopted rigorous dietary and sumptuary codes based on their reading of the Mosaic Law and manifested prophetic and other spiritual gifts.

During this period the sect grew to a modest size, including in its numbers Joseph Smith, Sr., father of the Mormon prophet, and Oliver Cowdery, Sr. [sic], father of one of the three Mormon Witnesses. [49 James Frisbee, *The History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, Vt., 1867), p. 57.]

Around 1799 the New Israelites come under the influence of a diviner named Wingate [sic] who convinced the Woods that secret prophecies and miraculous root medicines could be discovered by use of divining rods. Priest Wood pronounced the rods to be instruments of God's judgment and used their powers to make increasingly bizarre demands on his followers. For example, the rods revealed to Wood that Satan was inhabiting the clothes of two adolescent females in the sect, who were then directed to strip and hike naked over a nearby mountain to purify themselves. **A temple was built** and then abandoned by command of the rods, and for several years New Israelites spent their summers digging for treasure under their guidance.

This sectarian jumble of divination, prophecy, and alienation crystalized in Wood's prediction that "the destroyer would pass through the land and slay a portion of unbelievers" on the night of 14 January 1801 and that a great earthquake would obliterate the remaining unfaithful. The New Israelites recognized the prophecy as a second Passover preparatory to the end of the world. They abandoned their homes, painting over the doorposts the slogan "Jesus our Passover was sacrificed for us" as a sign for their possessions to be spared. They then gathered in a schoolhouse to observe the Passover by fasting, prayer, and exhortation. The local militia was mustered to meet any insurrectionary action by the New Israelites, but the night passed quietly. Wood announced a slight miscalculation, then eight weeks later instructed believers to contribute their specie to pave the streets of the New Jerusalem. [50 Ibid., pp. 60-61] At this point the diviner Wingate [sic] was exposed as a convicted counterfeiter, and the movement collapsed. The Wood, Smith, and Cowdery families [sic] left Middletown in disgrace for upstate New York, where their religious enthusiasm passed to a new generation.

Still other, less documented sects flourished in the hill country. During the 1790s Thomas Fessenden of Walpole, New Hampshire, gathered several congregations around his unorthodox "science of sanctity." Around 1805 William Bullard, a Vermont prophet, organized an ascetic community of "pilgrims" in the central Green Mountains. Perhaps the most elusive sect was the Annihilationists, also called the Nothingarians, who believed that the souls

of the unjust were not damned, but rather exterminated at death. This particular tenet, which assumed that the elect were the only immortal and truly alive beings on earth, was popular especially in the upper Connecticut Valley. [51 I. D. Stewart, *The History of the Freewill Baptists* (Dover, N. H., 1862), p. 58; Lee *Uncommon Vermont*, pp. 197-199; William Bullard, *A Union Prescribed and Recommended* (Windsor, Vt, 1804); Thomas Fessenden, *A Theocratic Explanation of the Science of Sanctity* (Brattleboro, Vt., 1804).

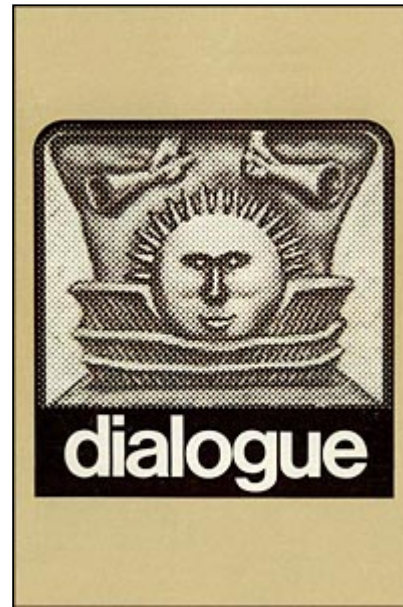
Note: Numerous local and religious histories make passing mention of the 1801 "Wood Scrape" -- far too many to mention here. Three of the more noteworthy examples are:

Everett Webber's 1959 *Escape to Utopia: the Communal Movement in America*, pp. 95-96.

Ralph N. Hill's 1973 *Yankee kingdom: Vermont and New Hampshire*, pp. 214-215.

Grant Underwood's 1999 *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism*, pp. 21-23

[Marvin S. Hill Review](#) of
No Man Knows My History 2nd ed.
from *Dialogue*, Winter 1972
[excerpt on Wood's New Israelites]



...There may be little doubt now, as I have indicated elsewhere, that Joseph Smith was brought to trial in 1826 on a charge, not exactly clear, associated with money digging. However, the reports of what was said at that trial are contradictory. One version says that Joseph Smith Sr. and his son "were mortified that this wonderful power [of the younger Smith] which God has so miraculously given... should be used only in search of filthy lucre." This points up a major discrepancy in Brodie's interpretation. Her thesis that the prophet grew from necromancer to prophet assumes that the two were mutually exclusive, that if Smith were a money digger he could not have been religiously sincere. This does not necessarily follow. Many believers, active in their churches, were money diggers in New England and western New York in this period. Few contemporaries regard these money diggers as irreligious, only implying so if their religious views seemed too radical.

The historian of Middletown, Vermont, Barnes Frisbie, was much closer to the truth when he said that the rodsman who flourished in Orange County, at Wells, Middletown and Poultney, Vermont at the turn of the nineteenth century were accentuated by religious not monetary motives. They saw themselves as the

children of Israel and believed in impending judgments, in the restoration of primitive Christianity and in the healing gifts.

Frisbie's characterization of these rodsman is substantiated by Ovid Miner, who wrote about them in the *Vermont American*, May 7, 1828.

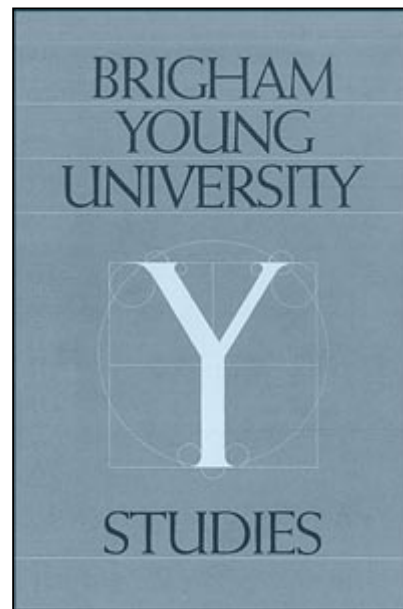
About 1800 one or two families in Rutland county, who had been considered respectable, and who had been Baptists, pretended to have been informed by the Almighty that they were the descendants of the Ancient jews, and were, with their connexions, to be put in possession of the land for some miles around; the way for which was to be providentially prepared by the destruction of their fellow townsmen.... [They claimed] power to cure disease, and intuitive knowledge of lost or stolen goods, and ability to discover hidden treasures....

Frisbie insisted that Oliver Cowdery's father was a member of this group. Despite some similarity between the ideas of the rodsman and those later advocated by Joseph Smith, and despite the fact that when Oliver Cowdery took up his duties as a scribe for Joseph Smith in 1829 he had a rod in his possession which Joseph Smith sanctioned, there is no evidence as yet to prove a direct influence. Rather, what this suggests is that Brodie's dichotomy between money digger and prophet rests upon her twentieth century assumptions. Only if she were, in fact, looking at the matter cosmically, from the standpoint of Mormon theology, would her conclusion make sense. Then, of course, she might ask, what is Joseph Smith, prophet of the Lord, doing with a seer stone and hunting treasure with it?...

Richard L. Anderson's 1984 Article
"Mature Joseph Smith & Treasure Searching,"

from *BYU Studies*, 24:4 (Fall 1984)

[excerpt on Wood's New Israelites]



[p. 521]

"The Gift of Aaron"

"The gift of Aaron" first appeared in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, referring to powers of revelation that Oliver Cowdery should use as he began assisting Joseph Smith in Book of Mormon Translation... its first printing referred to Cowdery's "gift of working with the rod." [[101 A Book of Commandments for the Government of the Church of Christ (Zion, Mo.: W. W. Phelps and Co., 1833), 7:3. end101]]

To some, this means that Oliver Cowdery had used a divining rod to locate buried wealth in pre-Mormon days... Some view Oliver Cowdery as a treasure diviner because of a local historian's theory in Oliver's boyhood area. Around 1801, a

bubble of zeal burst for the Wood family and associates in Middletown, Vermont. They had enthusiastically claimed revelation **setting up a new Israel** and a new Jerusalem by using the Bible and treasure sticks.... About forty years later, the movement was investigated by lawyer Barnes Frisbie, who sought to prove that these money-digging Israelites were "one source, if not the main source from which came this monster -- Mormonism." [[102 Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, Vt.: Turtle and Co., 1867), 64. This is the earliest printing of a history that was reissued in Abbie Maria Hemenway, *The Vermont Historical Gazeteer* (Burlington, Vt.: A. M. Hemenway, 1871), vol. 3, with the quote here on 819. An abridgment of these accounts is found in H. P. Smith and W. S. Rann, *History of Rutland County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason and Co., 1886), 653-60. This history also contains specific dates in Frisbie's life (889-90), showing how distant he was from the Wood affair. He was born in 1815 and married in 1843 after a late education and reading for law, resulting in bar admission in 1842. Thus his start of collecting serious history was about forty years after the discredited Woods had migrated. In fact, Frisbie's preface to his 1867 History mentions "the labor and attention I have given the matter during the last twelve years" (3), indicating serious collecting about 1855. (Compare n. 105 and the text there for Frisbie's development of a Mormon connection after 1860.) end102]]

His evidence was their biblical restorationism plus a fugitive counterfeiter named Winchell or Wingate, who had an undefined relationship with Oliver Cowdery's father, William, in nearby Wells, Vermont. Frisbie heard that the stranger "stayed at Cowdery's some little time, keeping himself concealed." [[103 Frisbie, *History of Middletown, Vermont*, 46; also cited in Hemenway, *Vermont Historical Gazeteer*, 3:812.]] The Wood group supposedly learned their rodding from this faceless individual. But Frisbie gives no reason for including William Cowdery in the Wood group except as host to Winchell/Wingate.

... William Cowdery is the only direct link between Mormonism and the Wood movement. Frisbie mentions him in two very disconnected paragraphs. At first he profiles William's supposed relationship with the counterfeiter.... But William Cowdery did not live near the Wood group, did not attend their meetings, nor is he even mentioned as a distant sympathizer.... Frisbie draws a strange conclusion: "I have before said that Oliver Cowdery's father was in the 'Wood scrape.'" But William Cowdery's knowing a man who knew the Woods does not make him a participant...

The main group of Middletown survivors of the 1800 period... said nothing of a counterfeiter or of Cowdery... The 1867 recollections of a minister who visited the group in the final weeks of their movement include mention of the counterfeiter but not Cowdery... [[106 Laban Clark to Barnes Frisbie, 30 January 1867, Middletown, Conn., cited in Frisbie, *History of Middletown, Vermont*, 57; also cited in Hemenway, *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 3:816.]]

Frisbie's own claims about the Cowdery connection to the Wood group are both unclear and unsupported. [[107 Like some who write today on Mormon origins, Frisbie features dark hints rather than definite information. For instance, the counterfeiter allegedly started his money digging at Wells, obviously an attempt to include William Cowdery, since he lived there...]]

[p. 522]

Frisbie's summation soars even further beyond his facts: "I have been told that Joe Smith's father resided in Poultney at the time of the Wood movement here, and that he was in it and one of the leading rodsmen." That claim is empty, for family and town sources clearly place the Prophet's father fifty miles away as a young married farmer in Tunbridge, Vermont...

Frisbie is here building his picture of a Vermont money-digging team -- Winchell/Wingate and the elders Cowdery and Smith -- to be later revived in Palmyra with their sons added. But both Oliver and Joseph said they had never seen each other before beginning the 1829 translation. [[109 For Joseph Smith, see *History of the Church*, 1:32... For Oliver Cowdery, see *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 14...]]

Frisbie also claims, without supporting evidence, that after leaving Vermont the counterfeiter was in the Smiths' New York neighborhood, a contention Frisbie claims "has been fully proven by men who... knew him in both places." Hardly so, for the historian's sources associate the counterfeiter with the Woods but not with New York Mormons.... Frisbie's sources may have carelessly assumed that his counterfeiter was the same as the "vagabond fortune-teller by the name of Waiters, who then resided in the town of Sodus ... the constant companion and bosom friend of these money digging imposters" (*Palmyra Reflector*, 28 February 1831; also cited in Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ*, 1:291-92)... the New York magician does not meet the conditions. Waiters has the wrong name, lives in the wrong town, and does not fit Frisbie's contention that the man went to Ohio with

the Mormons...

[p. 523]

... This guesswork deserves little notice, but it was apparently taken at face value by Whitney Cross, the analyst of New York revivalism, who shattered chronology by referring to the Wood movement and adding: "One of the two leaders, named Winchell, and a follower, named Oliver Cowdery, moved to Palmyra, New York, where the latter in time became Joseph Smith's clerical assistant." [[112 Cross, *Burned-Over District*, 38-39....]]

The Wood movement deflated about 1801; Oliver was born in 1806, so he could hardly have been a "follower" of Wood or Winchell. Further, as we have seen, no Winchell is known in Palmyra or around the Smiths, nor does present evidence make William Cowdery a Wood adherent or a rodsman....

[p. 524]

... As discussed, the Wood episode is no more than a cultural analogy. Joseph Smith's reasons for approving the rod must be reconstructed from Mormon sources....

[p. 525]

... Oliver's initial revelation closes with the command to seek heavenly "treasures" by assisting "in bringing to light, with your gift, those parts of my scriptures which have been hidden because of iniquity" (D&C 6:27). The revelation on the gift of the rod probably followed within a week. [[121 See n. 119.]]

It continued the theme of learning ancient truth through translating: "Remember, this is your gift" (D&C 8:5). And it could be exercised by believing "you shall receive a knowledge concerning the engravings of old records" (D&C 8:1). Then a second promise was made:

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, for it is the work of God. And therefore whatsoever you shall ask me to tell you by that means, will I grant unto you, that you shall know. [[122 Book of Commandments 7:3, present D&C 8.]]

...So the "rod of nature" in Cowdery's "hands" would be a means of gaining revelation on doctrine....

[p. 529]

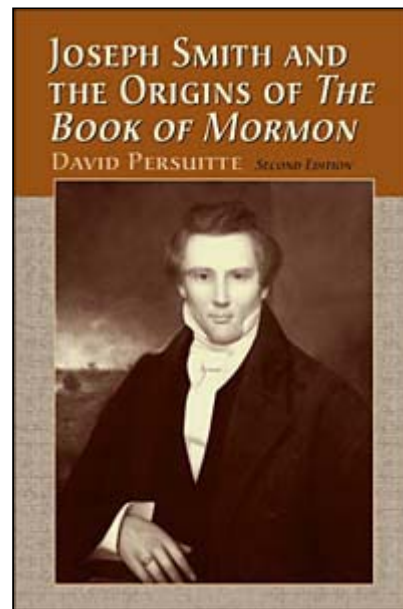
Oliver's "working with the rod" suggests that the rod would bring revelation because it signified associate authority. This is the major distinction from Aaron's rod in early magical handbooks. Anyone could read the Bible and attempt to duplicate any practice -- anyone could attach Aaron's name to magical wands or divining sticks. The name is not the issue but the authentic context of delegated power.

[p. 530]

The revelation -- authority aspects of Oliver Cowdery's rod are clues to its method of operation. The Woods' rods probably chose between alternatives, so the dips of the stem would answer questions on a yes-no basis. But the prophetic authority staff provides a better model, one harmonious with Joseph Smith's known thinking as the leader of the restored Church. Some associates of the Prophet used a rod in a special prayer. In 1841, Orson Hyde wrote from the Near East after dedicating Israel for the Gathering: "On what was anciently called Mount Zion, where the temple stood, I... used the rod according to the prediction upon my head."...

David Pursuitte's 1985 book
Joseph Smith & the Origins of the Bk. of Mor.
(© David Pursuitte 1985, 2000
limited excerpts on "New Israelites")

Appendix A The "Wood Scrape"



[p. 234 - 254 in 2nd ed.]

"The "Wood Scrape" is the name given to an affair that occurred around the year 1800 in the vicinity of Middleton (now Middletown Springs), Vermont. Its possible relationship to the origin of Mormonism has not been generally recognized in the literature but it has some interesting aspects that deserve to be made better known. In it one finds moneydigging, a religious cult that seems to have been a kind of primitive precursor to Mormonism, and an individual who appears to have had a connection with Oliver Cowdery's father and with Joseph Smith and his father.

[p. 235 - 255 in 2nd ed.]

Both Wells and Middletown are adjacent to Poultney, where Ethan Smith published his *View of the Hebrews* some years after these events. At the time of the

Wood Scrape, the Cowdery family lived in Wells, and it was there that Oliver Cowdery was born. The Cowdery family afterwards moved to Middletown, then to Poultney after the death of Oliver's mother and the remarriage of Oliver's father. Unfortunately, Frisbie did not give his source of information concerning Winchell and Oliver's father, and his information concerning the relationship between the two men seems to have been a little vague...

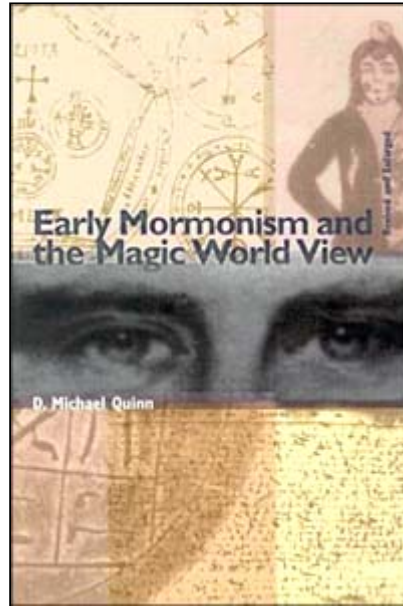
[p. 238 - 257 in 2nd ed.]

...Frisbie could not find the name of Wingate or Winchell in any of the material on the Mormons that he had researched. Nevertheless, his statements concerning Wingate/Winchell find a remarkable fit in the statements about Walters the "juggler" that Obediah Dogberry published in the Palmyra *Reflector*... If Frisbie had known about Dogberry's accounts of Walters, he surely would have mentioned them and would have reached the conclusion that Walters and Wingate/Winchell were the same person. Since he made no mention of Dogberry's articles, it would indicate that he had independent sources of information concerning Wingate/Winchell's activities in Palmyra -- *if* indeed Walters was Wingate/Winchell.

At this point it seems to be a reasonable conclusion that Walters *was* Wingate/Winchell. If he were not, it would be quite remarkable that two different "jugglers" would have played such similar roles in association with the Smith family and the Palmyra money-diggers in the years before Joseph Smith himself took up being a "seer."...

D. Michael Quinn's 1987 book
Early Mormonism and the Magic World View

(revised ©1998 edition text excerpted below)



[p. 35]

...a religious group began using forked divining rods for revelatory purposes in Vermont about 1800. This was not far from the Smiths, or from William Cowdery (father of future *Book of Mormon* scribe Oliver Cowdery). At Middletown, Vermont, Nathaniel Wood was instructing his followers that "they were **descendants of the ancient Jews**, and lawful inheritors of the whole country." They believed in alchemy and used a "cleft stick, or rod," to discover "the hidden treasures of the earth" and to receive instructions by "a *nod of assent*... from the *rods*," (emphasis in original) including a revelation "that they must build a temple"...

The Wood group's civil prominence, fervor, and open conflict with non-believers led to the so-called "Wood Scrape," a sensational even known far beyond the Cowdery family's residence six miles away. The Wood group's "Fraternity of Rodsmen" boldly prophesied they would inherit that region of the country in an

apocalyptic event on 14 January 1802. Tensions built during the weeks before the expected doomsday... So intense were emotions that the militia even fired upon members of the Wood group that evening... This was happening six miles from the Cowderys' home....

[p. 36]

In fact, an early history of Vermont reported that Joseph Sr. and William Cowdery had more than a casual awareness of the Wood group. Based on interviews with residents of the town, Barnes Frisbie wrote in 1867: "I have been told that Joe Smith's father resided in Poultney at the time of the Wood movement here, and that he was in it, and one of the leading rods-men. Of this I cannot speak positively, for want of satisfactory evidence.... I have before said that Oliver Cowdery's father was in the 'Wood scrape.' He then lived in Wells"...

This rumored association of the Smiths and the Cowderys with the "Fraternity of Rodsmen" in Rutland County has recently been disputed [R. L. Anderson 1984, 521-24; cf. chap. 4, etc]... Frisbie was unaware of LDS evidence that Oliver Cowdery was a rodsman... Coincidence alone can account for Frisbie's accuracy in identifying the Cowderys with a diving rod. [55. Historian David M. Ludlum's *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 242, concluded: "The strands of connection between the Wood Scrape and the Palmyra outcroppings are too tenuous to withstand historical criticism. Nevertheless, the two incidents suggest similar social tendencies in the soil of the two infected districts." However, like Frisbie, Ludlum did not know about the LDS evidence of Oliver Cowdery's divining rod or about Jesse Smith's 1829 letter. Compare Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," 523; Bruce G. Stewart, "Hiram Page: An Historical and Sociological Analysis of an Early Mormon Prototype," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1987, 99n43. end55]

In addition, two subsequent historians of Wells sought independent verification of Frisbie's account, and received a letter from a woman who was eleven at the time of this "Fraternity of Rodsmen." Nancy F. Glass wrote: "One Sunday they came into our house; I saw their rods all made of witch hazel so they would turn in their hands and point where the money lay." As a schoolfriend of Oliver Cowdery's oldest brother Warren, she wrote that "I rather think" their father was one of Rutland County's rodsmen. After quoting her letter, the two historians added: "as to Mr. Cowdry [sic] being connected with the Rodsmen, as stated by Judge

Frisbie, we had it verified by Joseph Parks and Mrs. Charles Garner of Middletown." Parks died in 1868 at the age of eighty-four, and was therefore seventeen years old when he observed the local rodsmen. [56. Hiland Paul and Robert Parks, *History of Wells, Vermont...* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle and Co., 1869), 81-82, with age and death information of Joseph Parks on 129; also Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:604n11. end56] Joseph Parks may have had a family interest in the matter. Orilla Parks had married David Wood, one of the participants in the Wood Scrape. [57 Smith and Rann, *History of Rutland County, Vermont*, 653-54, for David Wood as one of the participants; John Sumner Wood, Sr., *The Wood Family Index: A Given Name Index* (N.p.: Garrett and Massie, 1966), 102, no. 80. I have not verified Orilla's relationship to Joseph Parks. end57] However, Anderson dismissed Glass's eye-witness experience "as recollections of late childhood" which amounted to "lack of evidence," and dismissed the Parks testimony because the authors did not provide "direct quotes" from their now-deceased source. [58. Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," 554n107, first paragraph.]

From 1800 to 1802 Nathaniel Wood's "use of the rod was mostly as a medium of revelation. [59 Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 50; Hemenway, *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 3:819, 813; Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:607. end59] A connection between William Cowdery and the Wood Scrape would help explain why his son Oliver had a rod through which he received revelations.

Oliver's brother Lyman Cowdery was visiting Palmyra since 1825, but on 5 April 1829 Oliver first met Joseph Smith. Two days later he began serving as scribe' for the Book of Mormon translation (see ch. 5). At the time, Smith dictated a revelation to Oliver in which God said: "Behold thou hast a gift, and blessed thou because of thy gift. Remember it is sacred and cometh from above. And if thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous..."

[p. 38]

The historical record is silent about how or when Oliver Cowdery obtained the divining rod he was already using for revelation before April 1829. He was twenty-two years old, had been a school teacher, and that his father was later identified as a Vermont rodsman. If the Vermont reports about William Cowdery were accurate, Oliver probably obtained that knowledge of folk magic from his father, either by observation or personal instruction.

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... Aside from evidence that the Smiths and Cowderys used divining rods from the early 1800s to 1829, another early New York Mormon was also a rodsman. A resident of Livonia, about twenty-five miles from the Smith farm, Alva(h) Beman (also Beaman) was "a grate [sic] Rodsman"...

[p. 122]

In view of the 1830-31 published statements from Palmyra about the link between Smith and "Walters the Magician," it is intriguing that no reference to him appears in Howe's 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*. The reason for this may be that the Mormon apostate Philastus Hurlbut, who gathered much of the information for Howe's anti-Mormon expose...

[p. 123]

... A Walter(s)-Winchell-Hurlbut family connection began in Connecticut. It coalesced around the Joseph Smith family in Vermont, where Winchell was involved with the Wood Scrape. Members of Walter(s)-Winchell families followed the Smiths into New York, and were reputed to be linked with both Joseph Sr. and Jr. there. Members of the Walter and Hurlbut families even entered the LDS church. Philastus Hurlbut gathered almost all of the information about the Smiths in New York for Howe's book, yet, he may have had too many personal connections with folk magic to mention neighborhood claims of a Walter(s)-and-Winchell association with the Smith family.

As previously noted, residents of Middletown (Rutland County) claimed that a man named Winchell was involved in activities of religious folk magic with William Cowdery, Nathaniel Wood, and Joseph Smith, Sr. After his excommunication from the Congregational church at Middletown in 1789, **Wood taught that "himself and his followers [were] modern Israelites or Jews**, under the special care of Providence." Middletown residents added that the quiet activity of these dissenters ended in 1799, when a visitor named Winchell introduced the divining rod to the neighborhood: "He was a fugitive from justice from Orange county, Vermont, where he had been engaged in counterfeiting. He first went to a Mr. Cowdry's [sic], in Wells... the father of Oliver Cowdry, the noted Mormon." According to these neighbors, "Winchell made the acquaintance of the Woods; and they then commenced using the hazel rod and digging for money, which was in the spring or early in the summer of 1800." Based on his interview with more than

thirty old-time residents, local historian Frisbie added that the Wood group now gained converts among "several families" in nearby Wells and Poultney (which were 7.4 miles apart): "I have been told that Joe Smith's father resided in Poultney at the time of the Wood movement here, and that he was in it, and one of the leading rodsmen"... Winchell allegedly left Orange County at the time Asael Smith and his son Joseph lived there....

Eight months after the Wood incident, the September 1802 warning out of Justus Winchell was consistent with a newspaper report that Middletown put gradual pressure on Wood Scrape's participants to leave...

[p. 124]

After the Wood Scrape, Winchell apparently was in St. Lawrence County (Jefferson County as of 1805), New York, a few years after the Wood families settled there in 1804-1805. In December 1813 a minister from there wrote to two merchants in Poultney, Vermont. He referred to the Winchell these men already knew in Rutland County: "Col. Winchell who was married in Augst last to Leita Coates, was in Septr or Octr married to another woman in Adams; indited and sent to jail, broke out, caught, and now chained to the floor"... only eight miles from the Woodville

[p. 125]

settlement founded by Nathaniel Wood and other family participants in the Vermont Wood Scrape.

...the census of 1800 creates additional questions about the Smith family's location during the time of the Wood Scrape, because a Joseph Smith family is listed in both areas....

[p. 127]

The Congregational church provides yet another link between the Winchells, Woods, Walters, Cowderys, Smiths, and other participants in the folk magic of Vermont and New York. Nathaniel Wood (b. 1729) was a Congregational minister in Norwich, Connecticut, and was a leader of the Congregational church in Middletown before he broke with its minister and formed his "Fraternity of Rodsmen" there... Oliver Cowdery's grandfather was a deacon in the

Congregational church in Vermont... Oliver's father William was interested in Wood's activities in forming a schismatic Congregationalist group six miles away. Joseph Smith, Sr., was a member of the Universalist society in Vermont, but Congregationalism was part of his family heritage...

Similar residence and migration patterns alone do not establish personal associations, but civil and family records demonstrate that the leaders of Vermont's Wood Scrape originated in Connecticut and that the Wood Scrape's rodsman Winchell and "Walters the magician" of Palmyra originated in adjacent neighborhoods in Connecticut. In those same neighborhoods there were familial connections with three other associates of Joseph Smith in New York's folk magic: the Orrin Porter Rockwell family, Samuel Lawrence, and Alva(h) Be(a)man...

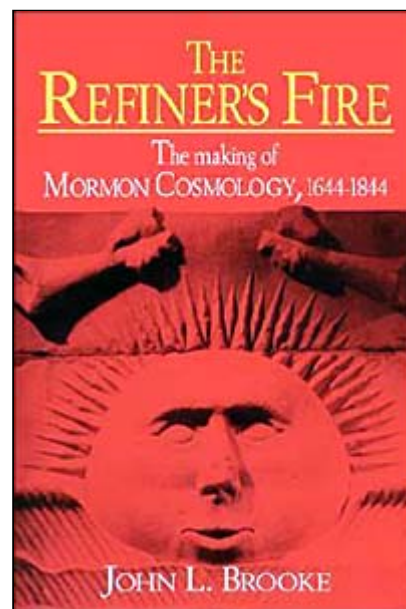
[p. 130]

...On the basis of geographic movements, Royal Barney, Sr., was one early Mormon who may have had direct acquaintance with the Woods. Due to community pressure in the aftermath of the Wood Scrape of January 1802, Nathaniel Wood and his extended family moved from Vermont to Jefferson County, New York, where they established Woodville in 1803. In the spring of 1804, Royal's uncle Edward Barney moved his family from Vermont to Ellisburg, adjacent to the Wood clan's settlement. Royal apparently accompanied his uncle to Ellisburg, where Royal Sr.'s children were born prior to their conversion to Mormonism in the 1830s...

[p. 131]

Richard L. Anderson dismissed allegations of a possible Winchell-Walter(s) connection with the Smiths and Cowderys in the Middletown Wood Scrape and at Palmyra because "Walters has the wrong name, lives in the wrong town, and does not fit Frisbie's contention that the man went to Ohio with the Mormons.... To the contrary, his family history specifies that Luman Walters was "a clairvoyant who moved to Ohio"...

John L. Brooke's 1994 book
The Refiner's Fire...
(© Cambridge University Press 1994
limited excerpts on "New Israelites")



see also [Brooke's Dublin Seminar article](#)

[p. 56]

... In 1747 the orthodox ministers of Windham County united in condemning this confession, calling it "little short of the Blasphemy of Jacob *Bekman* [Boehme], our being *godded* with GOD, and *christed* with Christ." But claims of immortalism had already begun to spread among the Separates: in 1746 in Windham one group

announce that they "were perfect and immortal; and one of them declared he was Christ." [87]

Counting themselves to be perfect in holiness, immortal, and even divine, some claimed the right of "spiritual wifery," a term to be applied to Mormon polygamy a century later. Among these were the Wards and Finneys of Cumberland, Rhode Island, whose notoriety reached down to the 1770s to influence Jemima Wilkinson's celibate Universal Friends. In 1749 Molly Ward abandoned her husband and took up with Solomon Finney as her spiritual husband. Finney's brother John later baptized his father and others on personal conviction of perfection; in 1751 he declared for "the new covenant or a spiritual union" of marriage, declaring "that Christians ought to marry in the church without any regard to Babylon, as he called rulers in the State." Spiritual wifery spread among the Immortalists of the Blackstone Valley towns of Grafton, Upton, and Hopkinton, Massachusetts, and even among the Separate and Baptist churches. In 1765 Baptist leader Isaac Backus complained that some among the Attleboro Baptists had "been ensnared this year with antinomian notions so as not to be content with their own wives." [88]

Just as the Blackstone Valley Immortalists anticipated Mormon plural marriage, they also anticipated Mormon divinization. Initially scattered in towns throughout the region, the Immortalists coalesced into two followings, one around Shadrack Ireland in Harvard, Massachusetts, which gravitated to the Shakers after Ireland's death in 1778, and another around a Nat Smith in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Ireland claimed to be immortal, and Smith claimed to be God himself, according to an account written in 1793 by Ezra Stiles.

Nat Smith proceeded to assume & declare himself to be the Most High God & wore a cap with the word GOD inscribed on its front. His Great Chair was a Holy Chair & none but himself must sit in it. He had a number of Adorers & Worshipers, who continue to this day [1793] to believe he was the Great God. [89]

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Stiles's account is confirmed in a long account from a Mormon source. Living for over a century in Hopkinton, the family of the prophet Brigham Young brushed up against Smith's Immortalists more than once. Born in 1787 in Hopkinton, Brigham's sister Fanny Young Murray in 1845 could write from memory to her brother Phineas about this "strange society of people."

They were and are the greatest wonder to everybody that knows them, of any people that ever came under my observation. They always had a God of their own, and they came in succession; when one died, another took his place. I was at the funeral of one of these Gods, when I was about eleven years old [1798]. But none saw the dead God, neither had they a prayer or any thing of the kind in their house. [T]hey were entirely by themselves, were very rich, kept their own [sacra?]ment every Sunday to the house of their God, but whether or no they worshiped him, was more than any one knew, as they kept close doors, and none but their own company were ever admitted into their meetings. [90]

A thread of treasure-divining moved through at least one of the Immortalist circles. Solomon Prentice Jr., son of the Immortalist Sarah Prentice, who lived with Ireland as his spiritual wife, moved to the Carolinas after the Revolution, where he was reputed to have "searched for Capt. Kidd's treasure." Similarly, Sarah's cousin, Nathaniel Sartell of Groton, was also drawn into the occult hunt for treasure in the 1780s, with a similar lack of success. [91]

Treasure-divining was a central dimension of the radical perfectionism of the **New Israelite movement**, which emerged in Rutland County, Vermont at the end of the 1790s and which would have direct links to early Mormonism. The New Israelites had roots in the broad orbit of sectarian dissent in southeast New England. The leader of the cult, Nathaniel Wood, had emigrated in the early 1780s from Newport Parish in Norwich, Connecticut, to Bennington, Vermont, where his brother Ebenezer had settled in 1761, and then moved on with his family to Middletown, in western Rutland County... Associated with the Newent Separates after the Awakening, Nathaniel Wood may have been among a group of Separates who rejoined the orthodox church in Newent in 1770. If so, he would have listened to the Reverend Joel Benedict, whose belief that Hebrew was "the language of the angels" might have shaped Wood's

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subsequent visions of a new Jerusalem. Benedict was dismissed by the Newent church in 1782, and in that year the Woods began to arrive in Middletown. Aspiring to be the minister of the local Congregationalist church, Nathaniel Wood quarreled with the church until he was excommunicated in 1789. He then began preaching to small meetings that evolved into **New Israelite sect**. [93 John S. Wood, *The Wood Family Index* (Germantown, Md., 1966), 114, 261, 354, 411; Francis M. Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut* (New London?, 1874), 441; Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism*, 84; Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont...* (Rutland, Vt., 1867), 44-6.]

The beliefs of the New Israelites brought together magical practice and biblical restorationism in ways not seen since Ephrata and the English revolutionary sects. After his excommunication, Nathaniel Wood prophesied "special acts of Providence" and claimed powers of revelation. Claiming **literal descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel** and to be living in a special dispensation, his family and followers began work on a temple and divined for gold "to pave the streets of the New Jerusalem." Their expectations that a "*Destroying Angel*" would bring down earthquakes and plagues on the "gentiles" so alarmed the town on the appointed night (January 14, 1802) the militia turned out under arms. When the Apocalypse failed to materialize, the Woods removed west to Ellisburg, in St. Lawrence County, New York. Their story was much entangled with the formative origins of Mormonism. [94 Frisbie, *Middletown*, 44-6, 52-3, 56; *Vermont American*, May 7, 1828; Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 30-2, 84-90; J. H. French, *Gazetteer of the State of New York...* (New York, 1860), 357-8.] ...

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This Masonic millenarianism also seems to have shaped the hermeticism and restorationism of the **New Israelite cult** of Middletown, led by the Wood family, recently moved from Norwich, Connecticut. One nineteenth-century account places Joseph Smith Sr. himself among the New Israelites. If true, it would have taken him about fifty miles from his young family in Tunbridge. In any event, Joseph would boast in the 1830s in Ohio that his diving career had begun decades before in Vermont. [11 Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 22, 31-2; Hill, *Joseph Smithg*, 67; Ronald W. Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYUS* 24 (1984), 444; Stephen Green, "The Money Diggers," *Vermont Life* 24 (1969), 48; Hemenway, ed., *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 3:1089.]

The other Mormon connection with the New Israelites noted in this account is much more certain. William Cowdery, Jr., the father of Oliver Cowdery, who would be Joseph Smith Jr's closest associate in the early years of the Mormon church, was connected to the New Israelites when he lived in Wells, Vermont, providing a room in his house for the counterfeiter Winchell. William Cowdery apparently learned to divine during these years, and his son Oliver carried with him to Palmyra and Harmony the power of the divining rod, which Joseph Smith spoke of in revelation as Oliver's "gift of working the rod." [12 On the role of William Cowdery and Joseph Smith, Sr. in the New Israelite movement, see Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, Vt., 1867), 46, 56-61; Marini, *Radical Sects*, 54-5; David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, N. C., 1985), 234-8; Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 31-2, 84-90. For the revelation about the rod, see *A Book of Commandments, for the*

Government of the Church of Christ, organized according to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830 (Zion {Independence, Mo.}), 19. There may have been a distant connection to the Cumberland, Rhode Island, perfectionists in the New Israelite cult, because an Ephraim Wood, possibly the grandson of Nathaniel Wood, was arrested with Appollus Finney for counterfeiting in Shrewsbury, Vermont, in 1795. Wood was acquitted but Finney was convicted...]

The story of the relationship between Joseph Smith Jr. and Oliver Cowdery is one of the central elements of early Mormon history. On April 5, 1829, twenty-three-year-old Oliver Cowdery presented himself to Joseph Smith in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and two days later replaced Martin Harris as the scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon....

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William Cowdery, Jr., Oliver's father, married Rebecca Fuller, Lydia Gates's second cousin, and settled to the west in Wells, Rutland County, Vermont, by 1788. Other Cowderies settled to the east in Orange County. Between 1785 and 1790 two of Nathaniel Cowdery's sons, Jabez and Jacob, settled in Tunbridge. Both were physicians, and Jabez's wife, Ruth, was also a healer, who achieved "marvelous" cures. These Cowdery relations may have provided a connection between Joseph Smith Sr. and William Cowdery Jr. later in the decade when the New Israelites offered another species of the "marvelous." Certainly William Cowdery was drawn to the Ontario country of western New York at roughly the same time as the Smiths. In 1810 he and his family were living on Lake Ontario north of Palmyra, and after returning to Middletown Springs by 1814, the Cowderies were living in Arcadia, just east of Palmyra, in 1830...

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...The Smith's spiritual world did not include organized religion, but it did apparently include treasure-divining. During the Mormons' Kirtland, Ohio, years, Joseph Sr. would claim to have been divining for treasure for thirty years, presumably since the first decade of the century. If he did join the New Israelite movement, it was before setting up in trade in Randolph and before his failed venture in ginseng. Divining was one way to wealth, commerce was another, and Joseph Sr. apparently tried them in quick succession at the turn of the century. Years later, both he and his son Joseph would be immersed in the lure of divining in the Palmyra region, and in the 1830s, as the Mormon church faced financial crisis in Kirtland, Joseph Jr. turned first to divining and then to banking.

Of course, one might well ask why Joseph Smith Sr. would have ventured fifty miles away from home, west over the Green Mountains, to divine for treasure with the New Israelites in years that saw the birth of his two eldest children, Alvin in 1798 and Hyrum in 1800. There is no convincing answer to this question, but there was a history of connections between the Tunbridge area where the Smiths lived and the west Rutland County towns where the New Israelites emerged. One of these connections

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was the Cowdery family, who had households settled in both Tunbridge and Wells, where they were involved with the New Israelites. The Macks had a long-standing connection with the region just west of Wells and Poultney in New York State, in the lee of Lake Champlain in central Washington County. At Fort Ann, two townships to the west, Solomon Mack had fought against the Indians with Rogers's Rangers in 1758, and in Granville, between Fort Ann and Wells, he had lost a 1600-acre grant of land in the early 1760s. This family history might have drawn Joseph to the lower reaches of the Champlain Valley, and there are hints of ongoing connections. Contact between the Smiths and the Woods may have been revived decades later, for Joseph Smith Jr. spoke of a gold bar in a cave in Watertown, Jefferson County, New York, near Ellisburg, where the Woods emigrated after the collapse of the New Israelite cult. ^[34] Isaac Hale and Elizabeth Lewis, parents of Emma Hale, who married Joseph in 1827, made up another connection in west Rutland County. They had lived in Wells, were married there in 1790 before leaving for Harmony, Pennsylvania, and left considerable kin connections in this divining town. ^[35]

Finally, from the 1790s on, the Smith family was exposed to Masonic influences, and Freemasonry formed an important link between Tunbridge and west Rutland County, between the Smiths and the Cowderies, and between the millenarianism of the 1790s and the culture of early Mormonism. The Grand Lodge of Vermont was organized in 1794, and in 1798 it chartered its fifteenth lodge in the town of Randolph, where Joseph and Lucy Smith settled in 1802. Joseph might have joined this lodge, but membership lists are unavailable. A "Joseph Smith" did join the Ontario Lodge in Canandaigua, New York, in December 1817, a year after the Smiths moved west, and Joseph's second son, Hyrum, was a member of the Mount Moriah Lodge in Palmyra during the 1820s. None of this proves a Masonic affiliation in Vermont for Joseph Smith Sr. but among officers of the Federal Lodge in Randolph there was at least one close relation of the Smiths. John C.

Waller, who married Joseph's sister Priscilla in 1796, was the lodge's Senior Warden in 1804; and a John Smith serving as Senior Warden in 1813 may have been another of Joseph's siblings. ^[36]

The Masonic history of west Rutland County, the New Israelite territory, is somewhat more complex. Here Masonic groups were chartered by New York organizations, reflecting New York's former authority in western Vermont and the social relations spanning the New York-Vermont border in the southern Champlain Valley. The first lodges in the area were formed between 1793 and 1796 at Hampton and Granville, New York, and in Rutland and Pawlet, Vermont; these lodges probably attracted

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members from the nearby New Israelite towns of Poultney, Wells, and Middletown. They were ordinary symbolic, or "blue," lodges, offering initiation into the three degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason of English Freemasonry. They were soon followed by the lodges and chapters of the Royal Arch, which took the aspiring Mason through his first steps toward the hermetic culture of the higher degrees. Mark Masters lodges, some of which were later upgraded into Royal Arch chapters, were formed by the New York Grand Chapter around 1800 in Granville and in Rutland and Poultney. An unchartered Mark Masters lodge operated in Pawlet between 1797 and 1799 and was warranted in 1805 by the new Vermont Grand Chapter. The concentration of Masonic institutions in the southern Champlain Valley towns did not go unopposed. Even though there would be no lodge in the town until 1807, the Congregational church in Poultney was thrown into turmoil by the Masonic affiliation of its minister, Ithamar Hibbard, as was a Baptist church in nearby Hartford, New York. The minister of the Poultney church in the 1820s, Ethan Smith, was an ardent Antimason. Until 1807, however, there were no blue lodges in Poultney or in the other towns where the New Israelites once divined for treasure and awaited the millennium. But on October 6, 1807, the Grand Lodge of Vermont chartered the Rainbow Lodge and the Morning Star Lodge in the New Israelite towns of Middletown and Poultney. On the same day the Grand Lodge granted a charter to the Rising Sun Lodge in Royalton where Joseph and Lucy Smith were living with their young family on a farm rented from Solomon Mack. ^[37]

The records of these three lodges are not available, so a detailed examination of

membership is impossible. It is, nevertheless, striking that the petitions for these lodges, located in the towns so central to the proto-Mormon experience in Vermont, were all brought forward in the Grand Lodge on the same day. Although we cannot determine the details of the Masonic dynamics connecting Royalton with the New Israelite region, the records of the Grand Lodge and the Grand Chapter indicate that Freemasonry was very important to the Cowdery family, another important link between the New Israelites and early Mormonism. Stephen Cowdery (born 1791), the older brother of the Mormon Oliver Cowdery, was suspended from the Rainbow Lodge in Middletown in 1816 and expelled in 1817. Stephen may have been something of a black sheep in a Masonic family. His father, William Cowdery, born in East Haddam, Connecticut, in 1765, and his older brother, Warren A. Cowdery (born 1788), later to be a leading Mormon, were members of the Royal Arch Mark Masters lodge in Pawlet. William Cowdery served in the Pawlet lodge as Master Overseer in 1805 and Junior Warden in 1807 and 1809. It is not unlikely that William Cowdery was introduced to even more

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rarified levels of Masonic ritual when Jeremy Cross, a traveling Masonic promoter, established a Council of the Cryptic Rite in Poultney sometime around 1817. ^[38]

The Cowdery family history is thus very revealing. At the turn of the century William Cowdery was deeply involved in the New Israelite movement, boarding Winchell, the counterfeiter at the center of the story, by one account; three decades later his son, Oliver Cowdery, bearing a divining "rod of nature," would serve as Joseph Smith's scribe in the translation of the *Book of Mormon*. ^[39] Between these two episodes, the men of Cowdery family were immersed in high-degree Freemasonry, certainly Royal Arch, possibly the Cryptic Rite.

In this case, then, high-degree Masonry seems to have served as a refuge for disappointed millenarians. In another, it would be a stepping stone to millenarianism. William Miller, the founder of the Millerites, was born to Baptist parents in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and grew up in Hampton, New York, just west of Poultney, Vermont. Settling in Poultney in 1803, he associated with men who "were deeply affected with skeptical principles and deistical theories," beliefs "that would pass with the world as philosophical, pure, and sublime." Joining the Freemasons, Miller was accepted into the local Mark Masters lodge in 1810 and

two years later appointed Overseer. Converted by his Baptist uncle and grandfather after serving in the War of 1812, Miller embarked on a close study of the scriptures. In the decades following, Miller would hear his own "Midnight Cry" and lead a great following to expect the end of the earth in 1843 and 1844 (exactly as the New Israelites of Poultney had in 1800), in same years that Joseph Smith Jr. was putting the final touches on the new Mormon cosmology at Nauvoo. [40]

There were other elements to this complex tangle of Freemasonry and millenarianism in the New Israelite towns. [In 1823](#) Ethan Smith, the Antimasonic Congregational minister in Poultney, published a text entitled *View of the Hebrews, or the Tribes of Israel in America*. As had Richard Brothers, the English prophet of the 1790s, Ethan Smith emphasized that the millennium and the restoration of the Kingdom of God depended on the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. In particular, the fulfillment of ancient prophecy required the return of the Ten Lost Tribes to Israel. On the basis of a report of a parchment book found in Pittsfield, Massachusetts (William Miller's birthplace), and stories of metal artifacts and plates recovered from Indian burial mounds in western New York and Ohio, Ethan Smith was convinced that the American Indian peoples were the Lost Tribes. The same general idea would stand at the center of Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon*, and it seems clear that Oliver Cowdery

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was familiar with Ethan Smith's book when he joined Joseph Smith in translating the Book of Mormon in 1827. [41] Ethan Smith drew upon an orthodox Congregational culture for his millennial views, but millennialism had much wider connections, including the mythology of lost texts and mysterious artifacts embraced by the ritual culture of Royal Arch Freemasonry. Ethan Smith himself was opposed to Freemasonry, but his Masonic neighbors easily might have identified the lost prophetic artifacts of Masonic legend with lost books or metallic plates describing Indian origins in terms of the Lost Tribes of Israel. [42]

The mysteries of the higher degrees -- both those described and those inferred -- constituted a fertile field reinforcing the connection between divining impulses and millenarianism and perfectionism. All of these themes, and that of counterfeiting, would play critical roles in the emergence of Mormonism.

Just as did the perfectionist sectarianism of the early Republic, divining and

Freemasonry appear repeatedly in the histories of other early Mormon families besides the Smiths and the Cowderies. The family of Josiah Stowell, who would hire Smith to divine for a silver mine in the Susquehanna Valley in 1825, had lived in Guilford, Vermont, in 1785 and 1786, precisely the years when Silas Hamilton recorded the mining activities of four Guilford men in his journal of treasure dreams and diggings, and just prior to the rise of the Dorrellites in the same locality. The Pecks, a leading family among those converted to Mormonism in Colesville, New York, in 1830, were also from Guilford. Brigham Young, who apparently believed in the divining stories for his entire life, was born in 1801 in Hamilton's town of Whitingham, just west of Guilford. Newell K. Whitney was born just north of these towns in Marlborough, Vermont, in 1795. Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball would be given rods by Joseph Smith as signs of their faithful apostlehood; on a number of occasions Kimball received answers "by the rod" to questions posed in prayer. ^[43] And dozens of men who converted to Mormonism in the 1830s had been Freemasons before the rise of Antimasonry; when Joseph Smith established a lodge at Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1842, more than thirty former Masons were available to form the charter membership. Among them, Heber C. Kimball had joined the Milner Lodge in Victor, New York, in 1825, and in 1826 he had petitioned for admission to the Royal Arch Chapter in Canandaigua, just before Antimasonry shut down the lodges in the Burned-over District; thirty years later Kimball would speak of Mormon temple ritual in terms of a Masonic restorationism, claiming Mormonism was "the true Masonry." ^[44] Masonic imagery could capture

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the imaginations of non-Masons, as in Parley Pratt's 1830 vision of a Masonic square and compass above the hills of the New Lebanon Valley in eastern New York. ^[45]

A mass of evidence thus suggests that the various manifestations of a popular hermeticism -- Freemasonry, divining, and counterfeiting -- played an important role in shaping the cultural experience of future Mormons in the hill towns of early Vermont. We also know, however, that these future Mormons were attracted to perfectionist Christian religion. Which, we might ask, was more important?

An answer, however imperfect, may be gleaned from a quantitative analysis of the hermetic and sectarian influences apparently at work in the various towns in Vermont where 123 Mormon converts were born: the presence of Freewill Baptist,

Methodist, and Universalist churches or meetings and of Masonic lodges and chapters; the records of petitions for convicted counterfeiters; and local histories of divining. Obviously a host of problems plague such an analysis, and it would be vastly preferable to know in detail the personal histories of individuals. However, if not taken too seriously, the results of this exercise are quite suggestive.

First, the best single relationship between the towns of Mormon origin and these six characteristics conforms with previous investigations of the religious background of Mormon converts. Vermont towns with Methodist circuits in 1835 were the most likely to produce Mormons. The particular salience of Methodist background for the first American converts to Mormonism has been noted by various historians and has been demonstrated for those people converted in Britain in the 1840s, where it was the largest category of prior religious affiliation. ^[46]

But, strong as it was, this relationship between Mormon origins and Methodist meetings was only marginally stronger than that with towns producing petitions for counterfeiters, or with Masonic lodges, Royal Arch chapters, Freewill Baptist meetings, or even histories of divining. Most importantly, it was the *combination* of sectarian and hermetic influences in a given town that was best correlated with Mormon conversion; conversely, those towns showing the *absence of either* and particularly the *absence of both* had a very low likelihood of producing Mormon converts. Any sectarian-hermetic combination of Methodists, Freewill Baptists, Masonic societies, and counterfeiting petitions correlated with Mormon conversion. The combination of divining, Freemasonry, and Mormon conversion was a relative rarity, but the four towns where this combination pertained -- Milton, Poultney, Rutland, and Rockingham -- together produced fifteen converts, the largest concentration of Mormon conversion of any category in this analysis. Tunbridge, Royalton, and nearby towns in Orange and Windsor counties producing Mormon converts

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were notable for their combination of hermetic and sectarian influences, whereas the towns around Poultney in Rutland County accounted for most of the localities where two hermetic influences converged.

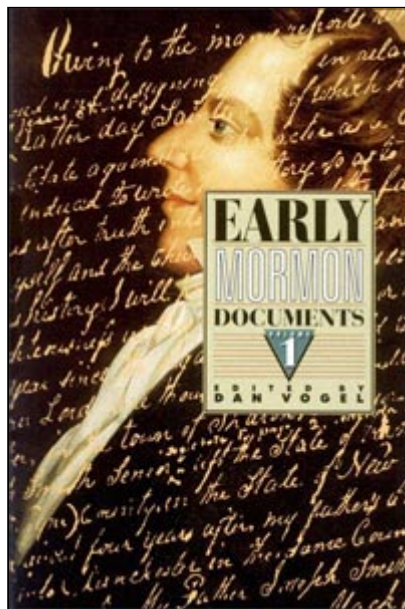
Although any interpretation of these patterns must remain tentative, they do suggest that the emergence of Mormon belief among Vermont-born converts was closely associated with exposure to the tangle of hermetic culture with sectarian

perfectionism. Clearly, sectarian origins do not tell the entire story of the preconditions to Mormon conversion. Rather, the attraction to Christian perfection was interlocked and continuous with the fields of purity and danger in the popular culture of contemporary hermeticism. This intersection of sectarian and hermetic purity and danger only becomes more important as the Mormon story moves west from Vermont into New York, Ohio, Illinois, Utah, and California.

What then of the Smiths? Joseph Smith Sr., moving his family from one hardscrabble situation to another, was certainly too poor to have been a Freemason in good standing. His Masonic education would have come from hearsay, kin ties to Freemasons, Masonic manuals, and his fascination with the related hermetic "field" of occult divining, if not also from his brush with counterfeiting. But he was clearly committed to the ideal of "restoration" circulating in various eddies -- Masonic and Christian-perfectionist -- in the Upper Valley of Vermont. The winter of 1810-11 saw a revival in the towns around Royalton, and Grandfather Solomon Mack was converted, apparently to evangelical Calvinism, and denounced Universalism; religious fervor suffused his *Narrative*, which he published sometime in the following year.^[47] On his part, Joseph Sr. "became much excited upon the subject of religion," but he stood firm against organized evangelism. According to one account of the 1840s, he "contended" for an unequivocal restoration of the primitive church, "for the ancient order, as established by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and his Apostles."^[48] Apparently, he also began to have dreams that reinforced this position, dreams that we shall consider in relation to the text of the Book of Mormon. Such sentiments were not uncommon in the Royalton neighborhoods; another son of Royalton, Orestes Brownson, was warned in 1815 by an old woman to avoid all churches except that persisting from apostolic times.^[49]

The Smiths may have been captivated by visions of restoration, but they had little free time or leisure, for these were years of unremitting movement and affliction. Moving across the Connecticut River to Lebanon, New Hampshire, two children -- including Joseph Jr. --- almost died of...

Dan Vogel's 1995 book
Early Mormon Documents vol. I
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limited excerpts on "New Israelites")



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... William Cowdery, Oliver's father was closely associated with, if not a member of Vermont's Wood Scrape, and participated in folk magic. Quinn has linked him closely with Nathanael Wood's "Fraternity of Rodsmen." (Quinn 1987, 84-86)

Alan Taylor also discovered this connection in his research on the previously cited "Treasure Seeking In the American Northeast," and states:

In 1799 a seer named Wingate arrived in Middletown as a guest of the Woods and of William Cowdry [sic] in adjoining Wells, Vermont. The Woods began to feature divining rods in their rituals, insisting that the rods' jerks in answer to their questions represented divine messages. (Taylor 1986, 24)...

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...Quinn goes to great lengths to establish links between the Smith family and other early Mormons, on the one hand, and the occultic activities of the 1802 "Wood Scrape" on the other. Pages 83-97 abound in second cousins and even third cousins twice removed, linked to associates of Nathaniel Wood by marriage....

[Vogel is here quoting from Frisbie] Mr. Clark says, "I ascertained afterwards that the eldest son of Priest Wood, called Capt. Wood, was the princi[p]al religious mover in sight, while Wingate kept concealed. Wood was Wingate's outside agent, and got up the religious excitement to aid the scheme." This Wingate and Winchell the name given me by Perry and others, are beyond question, one and the same person. What we get from Mr. Clark's letter, so far as it goes, of Wingate is the same I obtained from Perry of Winchell in 1862 -- that is, that he was detected in counterfeiting, in Bradford, Vt., came here and was with the Woods in their movement, and kept himself concealed in the time. Perry told me that he changed his name after he came, to avoid discovery by the officers of justice. Whether he did or not, I cannot be positive, but it is established beyond controversy, that a man came, first to Wells, then to Middletown, introduced the hazel rod, and afterwards acted a part with the Woods which we have indicated; and that Winchell, as given me by Perry, and Wingate the name in Mr. Clark's letter, both mean that man....

Now was this wild and mysterious affair a movement to cover up a counterfeiting scheme? Such has been the opinion of nearly all with whom I have conversed on that subject. The old folks who were here at the time, were very decidedly of that opinion.

That Winchell availed himself of this "outside" movement to cover up and aid his nefarious schemes, is very likely. He was cool and deliberate -- he "could raise the wind and not be carried along with it," and turn the effects of it to his own advantage.

In the Wood families, and especially in Nathaniel Wood's family, were some of the best minds the town ever had. Jacob Wood, the oldest son of Nathaniel, was elected one of the selectmen of the town at the first meeting after the town was organized, and almost constantly held some town office after that. He was more like his father than his other sons -- more inclined to be a religious agitator. Ephraim, the second son, was elected constable at the first annual meeting, and had several successive elections to that office. He and his brother, Nathaniel Jr., at first tacitly assented to their fathers religious notions, but after the rod delusion commenced, they were drawn into it, though they never took a leading part as their brother Jacob did. Nathaniel Wood, Jr., was undoubtedly the superior of all the Woods in point of ability and culture. He represented

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Middletown in the legislature five or six years in succession; was for a long time the active justice of the peace here; was town clerk several years, and held other offices. He was the father of Reuben Wood, [26 Reuben Wood (c. 1792-1864), oldest son of Nathaniel Wood, was born in about 1792 in Middletown, Rutland County, Vermont. At age fifteen he went to Canada to live with an uncle. In 1812 he joined his widowed mother in Woodsville, Jefferson County, New York, then back to Middletown, Vermont, where he studied law with General Jonas Clark. He married Mary Rice in 1816. In 1818 he moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he practiced law. Wood served in the state senate from 1825 to 1830, was elected president judge of the third common pleas circuit from 1830 to 1833, and was chosen for the Ohio supreme court from 1833 to 1847. On 5 February 1847 Wood went to Tiffin, Ohio, to judge a case against a General Sea, who was defended by R. G. Pennington and Oliver Cowdery. In 1850 Wood was elected governor of Ohio and served until he resigned in 1853 to serve as the American consul at Valparaiso, Chile. When he returned to America in 1855, he resumed his law practice in Cleveland. He died at Cleveland (Dumas 1962, 10:470-71; Lang 1880, 371; Wickham 1914, 1:215-17).]

...The Wood families removed from Middletown as soon as they could conveniently after the failure of their earthquake enterprise; they went to Ellisburg, N.Y., and it has been said, that ever after, they and their descendants have demeaned themselves as good citizens. [27 The *Vermont American* reported: "The leaders of the fraternity... 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; -- disposed of their property and removed into the county of St. Lawrence [later Jefferson County], New York; where it is said something of their former delusion struck by them" (7 May 1828). Quinn states that this is consistent with Nathaniel Wood Jr.'s resignation as justice of the peace in Middletown in 1803 and settlement of the Wood family in Woodville (adjacent to Ellisburg), St. Lawrence County (Jefferson County as of 1805), also in 1803 (Quinn 1987, 85, 90,

94).]

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... Mr. Clark in his letter says: "By what I have heard of them, (the Woods,) I have no doubt that the movement gave origin to the Mormons." This opinion of Mr. Clark, I have no doubt will be received by you as a surprise, as it would be to the people generally, both in and out of Middletown. But Mr. Clark is not the only man who has given the same opinion. I first got it from Jabez D. Perry, in 1862....

That the system of religion promulgated by Nathaniel Wood, and adopted by his followers in 1800, was the same, or "much the same," as the Mormons adopted on the start, is beyond question. It was claimed by the Mormons, so says a writer of their history, "that pristine christianity was to be restored, with the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues -- with power to heal all manner of diseases -- that the fulness of the gospel was to be brought forth by the power of God, and the seed of Israel were to be brought into the fold, and that the gospel would be carried to the Gentiles, many of whom were to receive it." [30 Quinn presents evidence that Justice Winchell was in Jefferson County, New York, about 1813, that he had a son who lived in various locations in western New York, that he may have occasionally visited Palmyra, and that he died in 1823 at Wayne, New York, only eighteen miles from the Smiths (Quinn 1987, 86).]

These were the doctrines of the Woods, as may be inferred from what appears in the foregoing. The Woods were very fruitful in prophecies, especially after the hazel rod came to their use; so were the Mormons in the beginning of their creed, and both the Woods and the Mormons claimed to have revelations, and sought for them and received them, as they pretended not only in matters of religion, but in matters of business. They pretended to be governed by the

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Divine will as revealed to them on the occasion.

The question now arises, how came the Mormons by these religious doctrines of the Woods? Was it a mere accident, that the Mormons afterwards got up a system like that concocted by Nathaniel Wood, years before, as the Wood affair collapsed in 1801 or 1802... when he (Smith) set on foot the Mormon scheme. What time Winchell went to Palmyra, I am unable to say, but he was there early enough to get Joe Smith's father to digging for money, [31 Palmyra residents claimed the Smiths began treasure digging as early as September 1819, and on 6 October 1819 the *Palmyra Register* reported

that the Palmyra post office possessed an unclaimed letter for a "Justice Winchel" (Quinn 1987, 86). Yet, as Anderson argues, there is no direct link between Justus Winchell and the Smiths (1984, 524).] some years before Joe was old enough to engage in the business -- but Joe was at it as soon as he was old enough, and if his biographers can be relied on, he followed it until about the time he pretended to have found the golden bible. I have been told that Joe Smith's father resided in Poultney [32 The location of the Smiths during the 1800 census is undetermined (see II.B.6, TUNBRIDGE [VT] CENSUS RECORD, 1800). There is no evidence of a Smith residence in Poultney (compare R. L. Anderson 1984, 522-23; Quinn 1987, 87-89).] at the time of the Wood movement here, and that he was in it, and one of the leading rods-men. Of this I cannot speak positively, for

[p. 619]

the want of satisfactory evidence, but that he was a rods-man under the tuition of this counterfeiter after he went to Palmyra has been proven, to my satisfaction, at least. [33 Frisbie does not clearly state his reasons for claiming Joseph Smith, Sr., had contact with Winchell in Palmyra. Perhaps he learned of Smith's use of a divining rod and treasure-seeking activities in the Palmyra area from reading the Hurlbut affidavits, possibly in E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), or some other reprinting, and knowing Winchell lived in western New York simply surmised the connection. If Frisbie possessed any direct evidence, he certainly would have given it (see R. L. Anderson 1984, 522-24).]

I have before said that Oliver Cowdry's father was in the "Wood scrape." [34 Frisbie did not previously say that William Cowdery was involved in the Wood Scrape but rather that he had hosted Winchell at his place in Wells and that they were "intimate afterwards" (p. 46; R. L. Anderson 1984, 522).]

He then lived in Wells, afterwards in Middletown, after that went to Palmyra, and there we find these men 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." [35 As Anderson notes, "[B]oth Oliver and Joseph said they had never seen each other before beginning the 1829 translation." There is no evidence of their having hunted for buried treasure together (R. L. Anderson 1984, 522; cf. I.A.15, JOSEPH SMITH HISTORY, 1839, 13; and III.G.6, OLIVER COWDERY TO W. W. PHELPS, 7 SEP 1834, 14).]

...the name of the counterfeiter, whether it was Winchell or Wingate, does not appear in any account that I have seen, unless he had by this time assumed another name, but he had been at Palmyra for some years and went with them from Palmyra to Ohio. [37 Anderson suggests that Frisbie confused Winchell with Luman Walters,

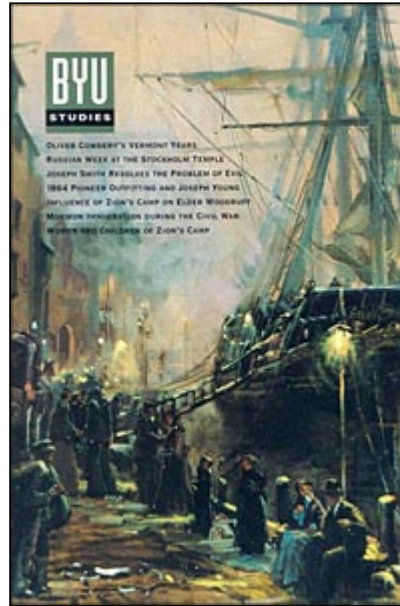
another occult mentor of the Smiths who resided in the town of Sodus, New York, but rejects the connection because "Walters has the wrong name, lives in the wrong town, and does not fit Frisbie's contention that the man went to Ohio with the Mormons" (R. L. Anderson 1984, 554, n. 110). Quinn agrees that Justus Winchell died in 1823 and there is no evidence that Walters went to Ohio with the Mormons (Quinn 1987, 96-97).]

He was not a man who could endure the gaze of the public, but his work was done in secret; that he was at Palmyra, acted the part I have indicated, and went off with the Mormons when they left Palmyra, has been fully proven by men who were

[p. 620]

here during the Wood affair, and afterwards removed to Palmyra, and knew him in both places. [38 According to Quinn's research, it would have been possible for Justice Winchell to have been seen in the Palmyra area before his death in 1823 (Quinn 1987, 84-91).]

Larry E. Morris Article
BYU Studies 39:1 (spring 2000)
(© Brigham Young Univ. 2000
limited excerpts on "New Israelites")



Oliver Cowdery's Vermont Years and the Origins of Mormonism

... [A theory] 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. [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.]

[p. 113]

The Wood Scrape

The Wood Scrape actually took place in Middletown, Vermont, seven years before William Cowdery moved there... Nathaniel Wood... 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... "[and] pretended to divine all sorts of things to suit their purpose." [59.] Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 47.]

... 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... "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. [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.]

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... 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, Wincheil, 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." [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).]

[114]

... Frisbie himself, however, admitted that the evidence for these claims was thin... 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.... [other] survivors said nothing of a counterfeiter or of Cowdery. [64. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 42-63.]

[115]

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. [65. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 37]

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... 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." [69. Anderson, "Mature Joseph Smith," 522.]

Existing records of William Cowdery's stay in Wells offer no indication that he was involved in the Wood Scrape... Cowdery remained in Wells and appears to have been a respected citizen both before and after the Wood Scrape....

[116]

Nor can William and Keziah's [1810] 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." [72. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 72]

... According to Anderson, "no known source tells whether Oliver did money digging before becoming the Book of Mormon scribe." [74. Anderson, "Mature Joseph Smith," 528.]...

(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...

[117]

...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"...

(4) Additionally, Joseph Sr. cannot be linked with Winchell in New York... 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." [83. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 125, 132.]

But Quinn's assertion fails three fundamental tests. First, there is no evidence that Winchell lived in the Palmyra area... 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... Third, nothing links Winchell with New York money-digging activities...

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

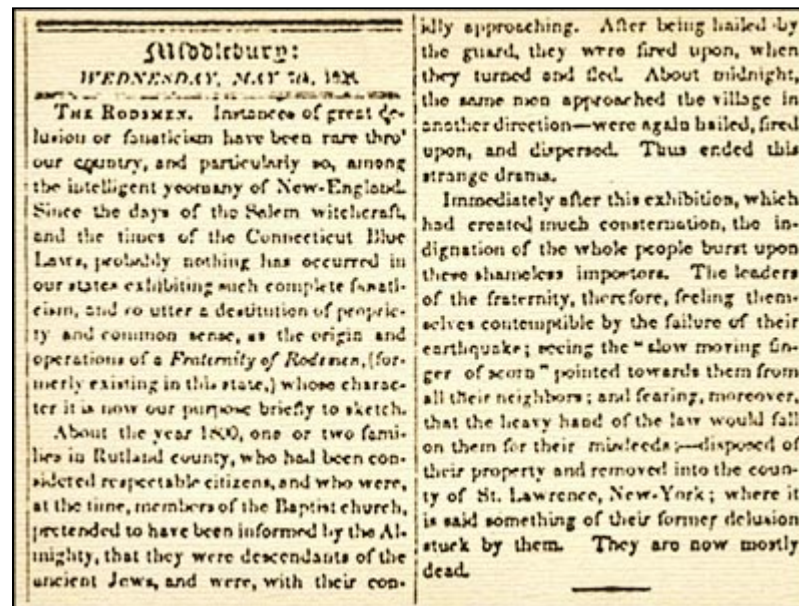
[118]

Winchell, Smith, and Cowdery were in the Wood Scrape in Vermont and were

reunited in Palmyra. [87. Frisbie, *History of Middletown*, 61-62.]

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....

Vermont American, [May 7, 1828](#)
(Ovid Miner, Editor)



Middlebury

Wednesday May 7th, 1828.

THE RODSMEN. Instances of great delusion or fanaticism have been rare thro' our country, and particularly so, among the intelligent yeomanry of New England. Since the days of the Salem witchcraft, and the times of the Connecticut Blue Laws, probably nothing has occurred in our states exhibiting such complete fanaticism, and so utter a destitution of propriety and common sense, as the origin and operations of the of a *Fraternity of Rodsmen*, (formerly existing in this state,) whose character it is now our purpose to briefly sketch.

About 1800 one or two families in Rutland county, who had been considered respectable citizens, and who were, at the time, members of the Baptists church, pretended to have been informed by the Almighty, that they were descendants of the ancient Jews, and were, with their connexions, to be put in possession of the land for some miles around; the way for which was to be providentially prepared by the destruction of their fellow-townsmen. --

They claimed, also, inspired power, which was to cure all sorts of diseases -- intuitive knowledge of lost or stolen goods, and ability to discover the hidden

treasures of the earth, as well as the more convenient talent of transmuting ordinary substances into precious metals. Within a year, numbers were added to this band of fanatics; and finally, most of the connexions of its originators were drawn in -- embracing parts of some fifteen families, and numbering nearly forty persons. The instrument of their miraculous powers, was a cleft stick, or *rod*, something of the form of an inverted Y; and when this talisman was firmly grasped in either hand, by its two points, it was believed to indicate the proper course to be pursued, or point out some substance of medicinal utility, or fix the locality of some valuable mine; -- whichever of these the agent was pleased to wish. In pursuing the directions of this monitor, the most ludicrous and occasionally very calamitous, results followed. Ill-shaped and craggy stones, the offals of animals, decayed wood, and even the most offensive ordure, were gathered up as possessing great virtues; and in one instance, at least, these last articles were administered to a sick person, until the credulous patient was relieved from her disgusting boluses by the hand of death.

Before the adoption of any project among the fraternity, *a nod of assent* was required from the *rods* of the whole, which was usually not wanting, provided that of the leader, (or *Mugwump*, as he was technically called,) appeared favorable. In executing plans approved by "the sublime direction of the rod," excavations were made in the mountains, some to a great depth; -- the frame of a large building was put up, (which is now in use as a barn;) and numbers of horses were killed for their bones. From the bowels of the mountain valuable ore was to be taken; the building was to be erected into a furnace for smelting and refining it; and the horses' bones were to be converted into *crucibles!*

The operations of this band of mystics attracted but little notice, till the latter part of the following year, when their movements indicated something more serious, and fears were entertained that some high-handed measure would be attempted, as a winding-up scene to their career of folly and infatuation. Their claims to being **descendants of the ancient Jews, and lawful inheritors of the whole country**, they declared were soon to be established by the hand of Omnipotence. An earthquake was prophesied to happen during the night of the 14th Jan. 1802; at which time the *Destroying Angel* was to move forward and smite all but the chosen. The *scene of carnage* which was to ensue had been much dwelt upon; and the ninth and eleventh chapters of the Book of Exekiel, (frequently made the subject of discourses at their meetings,) were declared to have special reference to the coming catastrophe.

As the 14th of January approached, excitement increased throughout the town, and the militia were required to be in order for service at a moment's warning. -- The military stores belonging to the town, were removed from the house of the *Mugwump*, (who had been their depository.) and the means of producing an *earthquake*, it is believed, were thus removed.

At sunset of the ominous 14th, the Rodsmen repaired to their leader's house, after nailing upon their door-posts a paper, on which was written -- "*Christ our Passover was Sacrificed for us.*" This was to preserve the habitations of the Faithful from the destruction speedily to be visited upon those of their neighbors, and many affecting interviews were held by the Rodsmen with their children, who were not allowed by the stern decree of the *rod* to follow their parents, and of whom these infatuates pretended to believe they were taking their final leave. -- At 9 o'clock, the military were under arms, and a sergeant's guard was posted on each of the four streets diverging from the village. In a short time, six Rodsmen, fantastically dressed, and equipped according to the direction they supposed given them, -- (Ezekiel ix, 2), were observed rapidly approaching. After being hailed by the guard, they were fired upon, when they turned and fled. About midnight, the same men approached the village in another direction -- were again hailed, fired upon, and dispersed. Thus ended the strange drama.

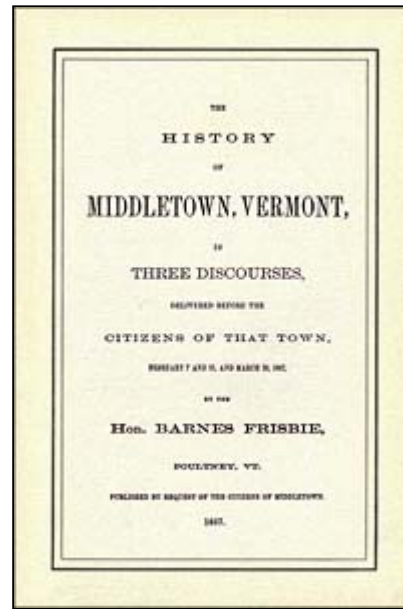
Immediately after this exhibition, which had created much consternation, the indignation of the whole people burst upon these shameless impostors. The leaders of the fraternity, therefore, feeling themselves contemptible by the failure of their earthquake; "seeing the "slow-moving finger of scorn" pointed towards them from all their neighbors; and fearing, moreover, that the heavy hand of the law would fall on them for their misdeeds; -- disposed of their property and removed into the county of St. Lawrence, New York; where it is said something of their former delusion stuck by them. They are now mostly dead.

Vermont American, [Aug. 6, 1828](#)
(Ovid Miner, Editor)

To the Editor of the American. --

SIR, -- In a piece published in your paper, a short time since, under the head of "The Rodsmen," you fell into a small error which I think it would be well to correct. The statement to which I allude is, "and who were at the time, members of the *Baptist Church*," -- it should have been, and who were at the time members of the *Congregational Church*. As your publication may be the only record of these poor fanatics, which will descend to posterity, I could assign, if necessary, a number of good reasons, why it should be exactly true and correct. Yours, &c. P.

Excerpt from Barnes Friesbie's 1867
History of Middleton



[pp. 46-47]

After Mr. [Nathaniel] Wood was excluded from the [Middletown Congregational] church, he set up meetings of his own, and preached to those who came to hear him, and succeeded, after awhile, in getting quite a congregation, consisting of his own family and family connections, and some others. He held his meetings mostly at the dwelling houses of his sons. His religious doctrines, whatever they might have been while in the congregational church, appeared to be far from orthodox after his independent organization, if organization it was. He professed to believe in supernatural agencies, and dwelt very much in his preaching on the judgments of God, which he claimed would visit the people by the special acts of Providence, as did the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the plagues of Egypt. The judgments of God were his favorite themes. At first his own family did not appear to adopt his new doctrines; but such was his tenacity and perseverance, that by the year 1800 he had drawn them all in, with many others outside of his family and family connections, so that he had at this time a number nearly equal to either of the other denominations in town. His peculiar religious doctrines will appear as we proceed. Suffice it to say, for the present, that he regarded himself and his

followers as modern Israelites or Jews, under the special care of Providence; that the Almighty would not only specially interpose in their behalf, but would visit their enemies, the Gentiles (all outsiders), with his wrath and vengeance.

In this condition we find Nathaniel Wood and his followers when the hazel rod was introduced, and the money digging commenced; but the Woods did not commence it, that honor belongs to a man of another name; but they were in a condition to adopt this man's rod notions, which they did with great effect in their work of deluding the people.

A man by the name of Winchell, as he called himself when he came here, was the first man who used the hazel rod. From what we have learned of him, he was, undoubtedly, an expert villain. He sought to accomplish his purposes by working upon the hopes and fears of individuals, and by a kind of sorcery, which he performed with great skill. The time he came here I cannot give, but it was, undoubtedly, sometime in the year 1799. He was a fugitive from justice from Orange county, Vermont, where he had been engaged in counterfeiting. He first went to a **Mr. Cowdry's, in Wells**, who then lived in that town, near the line between Wells and Middletown, in the house now owned and occupied by Robert Parks, Esq. **Cowdry was the father of Oliver Cowdry**, the noted Mormon, who claimed to have been one of the witnesses to Joe Smith's revelations, and to have written the book of Mormon, as it was deciphered by Smith from the golden plates. 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, and it is the opinion of some with whom I have conversed that he commenced his operations of digging for money in Wells, but I have been unable to determine as to that. It is well known that there was a good deal of money digging in that part of Wells. Whether it commenced at the time spoken of, when Winchell went there, or afterwards, is, to my mind, unsettled....

[pp. 62-63]

It appears from some of the Mormon histories, that the Mormon organization first consisted of the Smith family, **Oliver Cowdry** and Martin Harris, the name of the counterfeiter, whether it was Winchell or Wingate, does not appear in any account that I have seen, unless he had by this time assumed another name, but he had been at Palmyra for some years and went with them from Palmyra to Ohio. He was not a man who could endure the gaze of the public, but his work was done in

secret; that he was at Palmyra, acted the part I have indicated, and went off with the Mormons when they left Palmyra, has been fully proven by men who were here during the Wood affair, and afterwards removed to Palmyra, and knew him in both places.

What I have now said of the Smiths, **Cowdry** and Winchell, has been obtained from living witnesses, to which I will add a few quotations from authors.

Gov. Ford, in his history of the Mormons, says of Joe Smith, "That his extreme youth was spent in idle, vagabond life, roaming in the woods, dreaming of buried treasures, and exerting the art of finding them by twisting a forked stick in his hands, or by looking through enchanted stones. He and his father before him, were what were called "water wiches," always ready to point out the ground where wells might be dug and water found."

In a work written by Rev. Kidder of Illinois, some twenty years ago, which is the best expose of Mormonism and the Mormons I have ever seen, he has a statement purporting to have been signed by sixty-two credible persons, residents of Palmyra, N.Y. In that statement, those men say of the Smiths, that "they were particularly famous for visionary projects, spent much of their time in digging for money, which they pretended was hidden in the earth; and to this day large excavations may be seen in the earth not far from their then residence, where they used to spend their time in digging for hidden treasures." In Dr. Kidder's work, the first Mormons are frequently characterized as "money diggers," as though that had been their principal avocation, as it doubtless was....

1879 *Boston Daily Advertiser*
Daniel Dorchester's letter



Vol. 133: No. 139 (July 11, 1879.)

"ST. JOHN'S ROD."

**THE COUNTERFEITER WINGATE AND THE
GENESIS OF MORMONISM.**

Facts Hitherto Unpublished.

I have long intended to give to the public some well-attested facts in regard to the origin of Mormonism, antedating its usually recognized beginnings, but have hitherto neglected it. These facts exist in a thoroughly reliable form, and came into my possession directly from an eye and ear witness, -- a man of superior intelligence, caution and discrimination. My uncle, the Rev. Laban Clark, D. D.,

founder of the Wesleyan University, in whose family it was my privilege to spend nearly four years, entered the Methodist ministry in the autumn of 1800, and for a number of years traveled large circuits in Vermont. Mr. Clark was a very acute observer, of superior practical judgment, and possessed a very accurate memory. The following statement has been compiled from data several times repeated to me in personal conversations, and from a manuscript sketch prepared by him about twenty years before his death, and is believed by those who knew Mr. Clark well to be worthy of the fullest confidence.

In the year 1801 Mr. Clark traveled in the western part of Vermont, visiting the settlements from Bennington county to the Missisquoi Bay, and even the adjoining settlements in Lower Canada. In the latter part of the Autumn, while in St. Albans, he heard of a man from Rutland who had passed through that section, relating marvelous accounts of wonderful things accomplished near Rutland by persons who had found "St. John's rod." Several families in St. Albans were much excited by the story. Dr. Clark pacified the people, and advised them to pay no attention to such marvels. About the first of November he attended a quarterly meeting in Salisbury, Vt., where, to his surprise, the story of "the rods" met him in a new form. A number of men had obtained rods by which they claimed to be able to find roots and herbs curing all diseases. Several persons were in attendance at this quarterly meeting who had been to "the rod men" and obtained syrups, salves, etc. Mr. Clark was very incredulous, and treated the story as a hoax. Some time in December he visited Poultney, Vt., where he found quite a stir among the people, from a report that two young women had been following the rods, during a cold night, when the ground was covered with snow, with no other garments than were usually worn in the house, and that they had passed over rocks and ledges difficult for men to pass in the day time. Mr. Clark felt no interest in the excitement, thinking the stories "the exaggerations of some silly, sick-brained persons." The next evening his appointment was at Mr. D___'s, in Middletown, Vt. After closing the meeting he learned that Mr. D___'s daughter was one of the young women who had been led by "the rods" through the snow, etc.; that Mr. D___ was a strong believer in the efficacy of "the rods," and that they would work in his hands.

When the people retired Mr. Clark inquired into the strange affair. Mr. D___ seemed willing to communicate. He seriously believed that the rods possessed a mysterious power; that marvelous things could be accomplished by them; that, according to Isaiah, God would cause his people, in the latter-days, "to pass under the rod," when the latter-day glory should be ushered in; that this was soon to take place; that their rods were the seals with which the 144,000 were to be sealed by

the servants of God; that the lost tribes of Israel were to be gathered by them from their scattered condition, and that vast numbers of the present inhabitants of this country were Israelites, but had lost their pedigree, and knew not that they were of the house of Jacob. By these rods they would be designated and brought into the New Jerusalem, soon to be built in this country. At this stage of the conversation Mr. Clark asked to be permitted to see Mr. D___'s rod. After a short absence he returned with it, and lifting it up, said: "If Mr. Clark is a Jew let the rod point toward him." It moved and twisted in his hands and pointed toward Mr. Clark. "Well," said Mr. Clark, "If I am a Jew, I should like to know what tribe I belong to. Ask if I am of the tribe of Naphtali." He did so, but the rod would not move. Mr. Clark then said: "Try Zebulon." He did so, but it moved not. Mr. Clark said: "On the whole, I think that I belong to the tribe of Joseph." He put the question and the rod directly came down with apparent force. "I thought so," said Mr. Clark, "for my father's name was Joseph." Mr. Clark then understood the mystery of the working of the rod, -- that it moved "as the imagination of the mind affected the nervous action." After hearing all that Mr. D___ had to say, Mr. Clark believed the whole affair a delusion, but thought Mr. D___ an honest, sincere man, who would soon see the folly of his movements.

In four weeks Mr. Clark visited this place again, where he was to preach in the evening. About the middle of the afternoon Mr. D___ came to the house where Mr. Clark was stopping. His appearance being very dejected and melancholy, Mr. Clark inquired after his family, and what could be the matter. With a heavy sigh he replied: "Oh, the judgments of God are abroad in the earth!" "But what do you mean?" said Mr. Clark. Mr. D___ replied: "We have appointed tomorrow as a day of fasting and prayer, and want you to be with us." Mr. Clark answered: "I dare not; I am afraid of you. I do not know what you have connected with it." The next morning, finding some gentlemen of character and standing going to the meeting, Mr. Clark concluded to go. Reaching the place about noon, he found Mr. [Wood?], an aged New Light minister, had been lecturing in the forenoon on the prophecies, and was to preach again in the afternoon. He spoke from Rev. xv 4, dwelling chiefly on the words, "Thy judgments are made manifest." He was excited, incoherent and indefinite. Mr. Clark consented to preach in the evening. While at Mr. D___'s house, for tea, Mr. Clark noticed unusual movements, and, on leaving the house, saw a paper on the door with these words: "Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us;" but made no inquiries about it. He preached a practical discourse that evening, to a large audience, telling them that he had no new revelation to bring. As soon as his sermon was closed, there were strange movements in the outer room. Several men commenced to work with rods, and to

run to and fro. Mr. Clark out on his overcoat and prepared to go to Mr. D___'s for the night, but was persuaded to remain with the people. Very soon they were all ordered out of the house, and they took up a line of march, some crying, some sighing, and others saying, "I never expected to see such things." They were conducted to an old house that had been fitted up as a schoolhouse. A fire had been made, and all entered with much confusion. Some were alarmed, and none more so than the old minister. At his request Mr. Clark called the people to order, prayed with them, and recommended religious conversion. But the "rod-men" said that their rods had given them to understand that there would be an earthquake that night. This was what had agitated the minds of the people. They spent the whole night in that place, Mr. Clark quieting the people, and directing their minds to healthful themes until the morning dawned.

Returned to Mr. D___'s, Mr. Clark noticed that their crockery had been placed in the middle of the floor, to prevent its being broken by the earthquake. Soon two of the leading "rod-men" came in, and said they had found out their mistake -- that the fasting indicated by the rods was not in view of an earthquake, but was the fast to be regularly observed on the fourteenth day of the first month until the Jews go into the New Jerusalem, and the Latter Day glory shall be ushered in. Mr. Clark heard their story with a silent reserve, concluding that the last error was worse than the first; but that [it] would enable them to keep up the delusion and carry out some plan of mischief. He began to suspect that there was some person out of sight, who was the leading spirit of their operations, and that the others were victims of duplicity.

Owing to a change in the plan of the circuit, it was eight weeks before Mr. Clark visited Mr. D___'s again. In March he found only a small attendance at his meeting, and at its close the people quietly retired, none of the family even making an allusion to the former affairs. But Mr. Clark's suspicions were fully aroused that his friend D___ was liable to be made the victim of some villainous attempt upon his credulity, and he resolved if possible to deliver him from the snare. Taking him aside, Mr. Clark asked him how they were succeeding with their rods. With much animation he answered: "We are doing wonders. The rods have power over all enchantments. There are large quantities of silver and gold concealed in the earth, much of which is under enchantment, which the rods can remove, so that it can be easily obtained." He further said that "the rods, in the hands of certain individuals, had power to move silver and gold invisibly in the earth, and that they were collecting it into a common field, where they would be able to get it in any quantity that should be wanted." He went on to say that "the glorious day was fast

approaching in which great work would be performed; that the Latter Day saints were about to be gathered; that they would build a holy city, the New Jerusalem, somewhere in this country, and, they would have gold enough to pave the streets." Mr. Clark asked if the gold and silver were in coin or in its native state. He said it was "both one and the other." Mr. Clark then inquired if they had any man who understood the art of refining gold. He answered: "Yes, we have a man who is well skilled in the art, but he keeps himself secreted in the woods." Mr. Clark asked if he knew his name. He replied, "Yes, his name is Wingate."

Mr. Clark then became satisfied that Wingate was the moving agent in the whole affair, and discovered at once the nature and design of the operations. He knew of Wingate's movements in the northern part of the State, and after a little reflection, concluded to open the eyes of Mr. D ___. Addressing him seriously, he said: --

"I fear there is counterfeiting going on, and that you will be drawn into it and will be ruined in character and property."

He started with a shudder. Mr. Clark then said: --

"I think I can tell you how you can detect it in season to escape, if you are watchful. If my fears are well founded, they will call on you and others for a sum of money, and they will want it in specie."

Mr. D ___ replied, "They have done it already."

"And did you furnish it?" inquired Mr. Clark.

Mr. D ___ replied evasively.

Mr. Clark then addressed him sincerely, warning him to put away his rod and quit those people or he would be a ruined man. He stood and looked like one confounded. Mr. Clark took leave of Mr. D ___ for another four weeks' tour around his circuit, but with many anxious thoughts for the welfare of that family.

The name of Wingate convinced Mr. Clark that the whole affair of the rods, and the scheme of building up the New Jerusalem, was gotten up for the purpose of aiding a set of counterfeiters; for a few years before a man of that name was detected in the act of milling counterfeit dollars by two young men of his acquaintance, in the town of Bradford, Vt. The implements and the coin he was

making were taken and held by the town authorities, but Wingate escaped into New Hampshire. Further inquiries satisfied him that it was the same man who was deceiving the people in the vicinity of Poultney and Middletown. On his next visit to Mr. D____'s, Mr. Clark had the pleasure of knowing that he had rescued his friend from the delusion and the snare of the counterfeiter.

These are the simple facts of what Mr. Clark saw and heard, as carefully detailed by him. Soon after, Wingate and his adherents were detected in their counterfeiting operations. Wingate was arrested and put into the Rutland jail, and the gang was dispersed.

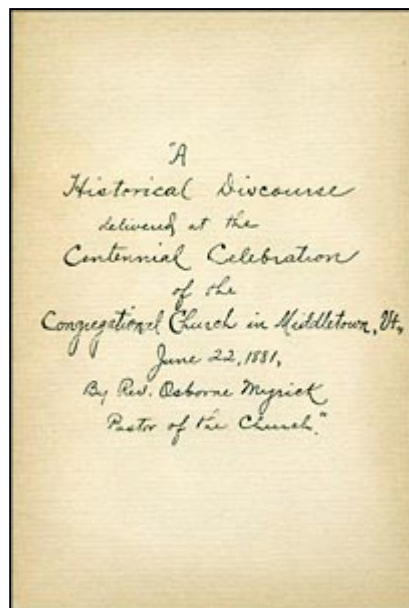
About 1827 or 1828, Mr. Clark heard the story of Joe Smith's finding his "golden Bible," while hunting for minerals with his rod. It at once brought to his mind Wingate's rods, but without suspicion of any connection between the two parties. Mr. Clark says: "I viewed it as a specimen of the same kind of imposition and knavery; but the scene of Smith's operations being at a distance from that of Wingate's, I paid little attention to it. When the Mormons commenced building in Ohio, and sent out men to preach the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints, and that they were about to build a temple where the saints were to be gathered, I could not resist the conviction that there must be some connection between their movements and what I had known about thirty years before in Vermont. In 1838 I visited Ohio, where I met Mr. Ezra Booth, who had been acquainted with Joe Smith and had travelled with him until convinced of his knavery and blasphemous pretensions. From him I learned the striking similarity of Smith's methods and those of the "rod-men" in Vermont. Subsequently I saw in the papers a notice of the death of Smith's mother, stating that she had formerly resided in Rutland county, Vt., and I also learned from the Rev. Tobias Spicer, who had resided in Poultney, that Sidney Rigdon, Smith's high priest and revelator, was from Rutland county, and must have been acquainted with Wingate's doctrine of the Latter Day Saints, the gathering of the lost tribes of Israel, his method of obtaining gold, etc. Having to my satisfaction ascertained that the Smiths and Rigdon families were from the neighborhood where I had witnessed Wingate's imposition, I have no doubt that the seeds of Mormonism were sown by that notorious counterfeiter. Rigdon was in Pittsburgh about 1823-4, where he professed to be studying this new Bible for three years, but was in fact studying Spaldin's 'found manuscript,' and translating Smith's 'Golden Bible.'"

Such is the clear and unvarnished account of the remote beginnings of that monstrous system of Mormon imposture, as related by the Rev. Dr. Laban Clark.

Believing that it will contribute something toward a fuller exhibit of the history of Mormonism and its essence, I herewith commit it to the public. Daniel
Dorchester.

Natick, Mass., June 7, 1879.

Rev Osborne Myrick's
"A Historical Discourse..." (1881 manuscript)



[from copy in Rutland Hist. Soc.]

[---- = unnumbered page breaks]

"A
 Historical Discourse
 delivered at the
 Centennial Celebration
 of the
 Congregational Church in Middletown, Vt.,
 June 22, 1881,
 By Rev. Osborne Myrick
 Pastor of the Church."

...

Trials

The trials of the Church, for the first quarter century, were such as it would seem few Churches at the present day could endure. The members were struggling for a home in a comparative wilderness. None of them were in lucrative circumstances. There were, from 1784, three religious sects here. They had no settled pastor. And added to all, the notorious **Rev. Nathaniel Wood, the virtual father of Mormonism**, and his followers, for nearly twenty years, were a most persistent and incorrigible source of trouble, continually throwing bombshells for their overthrow.

The history of Woodism: its persistent efforts to vreed discord and strife in this Church, its extravagances in doctrines and practice, its laying claim to [----- ----- --
 --- ----]

[these hills] which its enthusiasm largely and in vain dug up, and its foretelling, at last, with all the confidence of the bogus modern Mother Shipton an earthquake on the night of Jan. 14, 1801, which failing, was vitually an earthquake to scatter its

adherents to the four winds, planting, however, some of them in Palmyra, N.Y., among whom were the fathers of Joe Smith, of Oliver Cowdry and of A.M. Pratt, and others of its most rabid adherents in Middletown, to practise there the same experiments with the hazel rod and advocate the same doctrines as here until 1830, Joe Smith's time, when he vitalized Woodism into Mormonism; all this Judge Frisbie has most fully given in his valuable [history of the town](#). Thus here, out of Woodism sprang Mormonism. Little did our fathers in this Church imagine the extent to which the fanaticism of Wood,

taking root elsewhere, would grow. A letter from the Hon. Barnes Frisbie, the accurate historian of our town, received within a few days, let me say in passing, assures me that his investigations, made since his history was published, have fully satisfied him that Mormonism arose from Woodism.

He closes his letter, June 9, 1881, with these words: "I believe that their (the Woodites') movement in Middletown, as Rev. Laban Clarke says, '*gave origin to Morminism,*' as firmly as I believe Mormonism exists."

Nor were these troubles all. The unenlightened sentiment upon temperance, the lack of general information upon many matters now well understood, (as dancing, as to which there were councils &c to settle its status) led the Church into many trials Public sentiment was not enlightened as now in regard to the temperance question. It was

[----ons], or be dealt with. On the action of the Church in numerous cases of discipline which appears upon the records, I have sometimes thought, as we say, that "they were more nice than wise," yet this thought forces itself upon me: -- while they were exact and held all to the very letter of their obligations, we are loose in that regard and ours may be the greater evil. Withal, it has always seemed to me as though their bond of union was stronger than ours. They were more watchful and vigilant in the detection of wrong, and at the same time ready to help the needy, and kept their social relations with each other more intimate than we do; they were more like "a band of brothers" than we are.

A difficulty of long standing commenced between the Church and Nathaniel

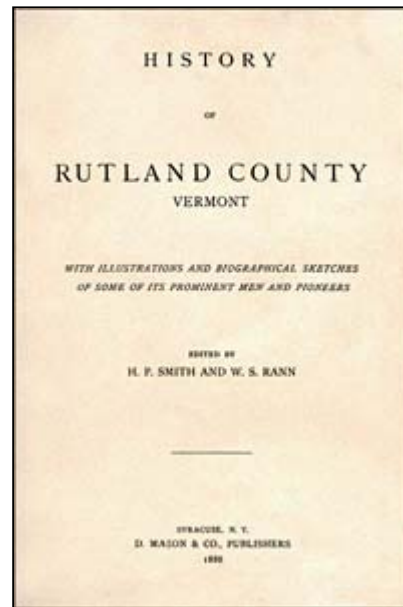
Wood, a preacher and one of the early settlers of the town, not long after the Church was formed,

and ended after the explosion of the so-called "Woodism" in January 1801. But as an account of this, in some respects, wonderful affair appears in my Middleton History, I need not repeat it here...

Note 1: The final page of the Myrick manuscript cites an otherwise unknown text: "Early History of the Congregational Church of Middletown" (a paper prepared and read by Barnes Frisbie at the Centennial at Middleton, June 22, 1881). Probably this address (if it has been preserved) contains nothing of substance pertaining to the Nathaniel Wood cult, which is not also found in Frisbie's 1867 history.

Note 2: Philip Crossman has consulted the manuscript records of the Middletown Congregational Church and [there discovered](#) that Rev. Myrick complained that the congregation's "founding fathers seemed to be 'more expert with the battle ax than with the implements of peace.'" Crossman notes that "Nathaniel Wood" (probably the father) registered a complaint against his brethren, Jonathan Brewster and Joseph Spaulding, for some trivial reason as early as Dec. 6, 1787. Crossman has also excerpted some of the Middletown Congregational Church records dealing with the 1800-1801 "Wood Scrape," and his "ancestor," the "infamous" Reverend Nathaniel Wood, but has not yet made that material available for web-publication.

H. P. Smith and W. S. Rann's
History of Rutland County, Vermont (1886)



[p. 653]

TOWN OF MIDDLETOWN.

...The census of the town in 1800 shows the population to have been one thousand and sixty-six -- a gain of three hundred and sixty-seven in nine years. This indicates very rapid settlement. The village had sprung into existence with about as many inhabitants as it now has, and probably more business. Every part of the town was settled and the farms were cleared or partly cleared and under successful cultivation.

The "Woods Scrape." This affair (it having been generally termed "the Woods scrape"), occurred in Middletown about the year 1800, and deserves brief mention here; our account being drawn from the very careful investigations made by judge Barnes Frisbie. The Wood families were early settlers of the town and came from Bennington; some of them were in this town as early as 1782 and were originally from Norwich, Conn. In 1800 they were more numerous here than the people of any other name in the town; there

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being at that time Nathaniel, Nathaniel, jr., Ephraim, Jacob, Ebenezer, Ebenezer, jr., John and John, jr., Philemon, Lewis, David and Moseley Wood. The Elder Nathaniel was the father of Nathaniel, jr., and of Jacob and Ephraim. Nathaniel was a preacher and after the organization of the Congregational Church, offered his services in their pulpit; but Deacon Jonathan Brewster, having known him in Connecticut as a man who delighted in controversy and neighborhood difficulty, opposed Wood's proposition. He was, however, a member of the church until 1789, when that body passed the following:

"That Joseph Spaulding, Lewis Wood and Increase Rudd be a committee to confer with Mr. Nathaniel Wood, and tell him his fault, viz.: of saying one thing and doing contrary, and persisting in contention, and saying in convention that he wished for a council; and when the church, by their committee, proposed to have a council to settle the whole matter, he utterly refused."

In October of that year the church excommunicated him. It appears that this trouble arose mainly from Wood's charges against other members and the church, in which he claimed that injustice had been done him. He was a very ambitious man, had a strong will, good mental power and could not endure defeat.

Being thus excluded from the church he began holding meetings of his own, chiefly in the dwellings of his sons. At this time, however it might have been previously, his doctrines included a belief in supernatural agencies and special judgments of God upon the people. By the year 1800, such was his tenacity of purpose and his influence upon others that he had drawn into his circle nearly as many as constituted either of the other congregations. **These he assumed to regard as modern Israelites, or Jews, who were under the special guardianship of the Almighty,** while the "Gentile" (that is, all who were opposed to him) would suffer for their action. Such was the situation of Wood and his followers, when the new phase of the affair was developed through the use of a witch hazel rod for the discovery of buried treasure and money-digging. The Woods did not begin this feature of the business, but they were in condition to readily assume it.

A man calling himself Winchell when he first arrived in the place began using the hazel rod. He was undoubtedly a great and an expert rascal, and probably came some time in the year 1799. It developed that he was a fugitive from justice from Orange county, Vt., where he had been engaged in counterfeiting. He went to the house of Mr. Cowdry, near the line between Wells and Middletown, and staid there

for some time, becoming intimate with that family. Mr. Cowdry was the father of Oliver Cowdry, who later became a noted Mormon and claimed to have written the book of Mormon. It is probable that while Winchell was at Cowdry's he began his impositions in the way of money-digging. Later in the year 1799 he repaired to Ezekiel Perry's, in the extreme south part of the town, and remained there all winter, keeping

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secreted from public gaze and practicing his deceptions whenever possible without attracting too much attention to himself. In the spring of 1800 he became a little bolder and gathered quite a number in that immediate neighborhood, whom he confidently assured there was money buried in that region and that he could find it with the rod. He told them if they would keep the secret and aid in digging for it, they should share in the results. When everything was ready, Winchell, followed by his dupes, took his rod, went to the hill east of Perry's house and there, just on the Tinnmouth side of the line, pretended that the rod had located the treasure. His followers immediately began digging, which was continued two or three days, when the party began to show signs of giving out. Winchell made other investigations with his rod, and informed them that the money was in an iron chest under a great stone, and that they would soon come to it. Again they went to work and soon struck a stone. Again Winchell had recourse to his rod, and as a result told the men they must wait till sundown before raising the stone; that not a word must be uttered nor their faith waver in the least, or he could not answer for the consequences. After much prying and lifting at a stone so heavy as to defy their efforts, one of the men stepped on another's foot, and the latter cried out, "Get off my toes!" Winchell then exclaimed, "The money is gone! Flee for your lives!" Every man dropped his tools and ran in terror from the spot. Winchell had got what little money the dupes had, while the digging was going on, which was, doubtless, his prime object.

Soon after this affair Winchell made the acquaintance of the WoodS, whom he found ready and anxious to join in his ignoble work. They began the use of the rod, the elder Wood using it mostly as a means of revelation, from which he deduced and delivered numerous prophecies; while Jacob, one of his sons, became the "expert" in the use of the rod for treasure-finding. The WoodS did not do much of the actual labor of digging, leaving the hard work for their followers, while Winchell still remained concealed. The greatest part of the digging was done on the Barber farm and on the Zenas Frisbie farm, then owned by Ephraim Wood; but

they dug a good deal in many other places, and many ludicrous incidents are related in connection with this pastime, for which we have not the space. The rods-men, as they were called, became absolutely infatuated and gave up most of their time to the folly, and several families outside of this town indulged in money-digging.

Among the numerous instances of imposition practiced and credulity developed, which we cannot stop to relate, was a pretended revelation to the WoodS that they must build a temple. The timber was prepared and the frame raised as far as the rafters, when another revelation put an end to the project. 'Towards the end of the year 1800 it began to be apparent that a crisis was approaching. "Priest Wood," as the old man was called, was becoming more vehement and frenzied on his favorite theme of God's judgments on the misguided

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people who did not adopt his creed, and it was not difficult to perceive that some sort of a collapse or crisis was near. Finally, as anticipated, a revelation came that there was to be an earthquake, just prior to which "the destroyer" would pass through the land and slay a portion of the unbelievers and the earthquake would complete the destruction of the remainder, with their possessions. The day predicted for this great event was January 14, 1801. Concerning this climax of the whole miserable business we now quote from judge Frisbie's history of the town as follows:

When the day arrived for the earthquake, the WoodS and their friends all collected at the house of Nathaniel Wood, jr., who lived on what has been known as the Micah Vail farm, which is now owned and occupied by Crockee Clift, and as they left their own houses, prepared them for the earthquake by putting the crockery on the floors, and wrote on each of their door-posts "Jesus our passover was sacrificed for us." The rods-men, or those who handled the rods, among whom Captain Wood was chief, were at Nathaniel jr.'s, house early in the day. One of their duties on this occasion was to determine who were and who were not to be saved from the approaching destruction or "plague," as they called it, and to admit such into the house, and those only who were to be spared. The occasion was with them the Passover, and how they kept it will pretty fully appear from the letter given hereafter.

Up to the evening of this day the people of the town had looked unconcerned upon this folly of the Woods, but now they became suddenly aroused, and many were very much alarmed. They feared some evil might befall some of the inhabitants

during the night. They (the Gentiles) had no belief in the Woods' predictions, but feared that they or some of their followers would themselves turn "destroying angels" and kill some of the inhabitants, or get up an artificial earthquake by the use of powder, which would result in injury to persons or property. Captain Joel Miner was commander-in-chief of the militia in town, and hastily collected his company. Captain Miner was a very energetic, as well as a very earnest man. General Jonas Clark was at the time one of his subordinate officers, and was teaching a singing school which had assembled at the house of Mr. Filmore. Captain Miner came in much excited, reprimanded him for his indifference in the matter, and ordered him to duty. He left his singing school at once, and took his place in the militia. The general was not in the habit of neglecting his duty, but he was a philosopher, and it is probable that he "didn't think there would be much of a shower." Captain Miner stationed his company as sentinels and patrols in different parts of the town, with directions to allow no person to pass them unless a satisfactory account of themselves could be given, and especially to have an eye out for the "destroying angels." The town had a quantity of powder, balls and flints, as the law then required; these were kept in the Congregational meeting-house in a sort of cupboard under the pulpit. From this the militia were supplied

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with the requisite ammunition, and Jonathan Morgan was left here to guard the military stores. There was no sleep that night among the inhabitants; fear, consternation, great excitement and martial law prevailed throughout the night; but the morning came without any earthquake, or any injury done to any of the inhabitants or their property, except Jacob Wood's crockery was broken up in his house, where he left it on the floor. A journeyman hatter in the employ of Dyer Leffingwell said he thought "the earthquake hadn't ought to go for nothing," and went into the house (it was where Lucius Copeland, esq., now lives) in Captain Wood's absence to attend the Passover, and broke up and destroyed his crockery. That was the extent of the mischief so far as the destruction of property was concerned, and no individual received any bodily harm. The militia were dismissed in the morning and went to their homes.

We now introduce the letter to which reference has been made. It is from Rev. Laban Clark, D. D., a man who was over ninety years old when he wrote. Mr. Clark was with the Woods on the eventful night.

"In the year 1801 I traveled in the north part of Vermont, and in Lower Canada. I met at that time a man who told wonderful stories of finding St. John's rod, and the strange things it accomplished. November 1, 1801, I went to Brandon circuit, which then included all of Rutland county. I heard, on arriving there, much talk of the rod-men. People were saying that certain persons were directed by rods to certain plants

and roots that they used to cure diseases, in many cases which they thought almost miraculous. In December I went to Poultney for my first appointment there; and was informed that two young women had been following the rods in a severe cold and dark night over places where men could scarcely go by daylight. I went thence to Middletown, where I preached in the house of a Mr. Done, the only Methodist family in the place. After the close of the services the people began to inquire of Mr. Done about the "girls' tramp;" and I learned that his daughter was one of the young women above mentioned. When I could see Mr. Done alone I conversed with him upon the subject. He told me that many people in America were, unknown to themselves, Jews, and these divining rods would designate who they were. I asked him to let me see one of the rods. After some hesitation he did so. I asked him to learn by it whether I were a Jew. The rod immediately pointed towards me. I said then, 'If that is true, please tell me to what tribe I belong?' He tried several different tribes, but there was no motion of the rod. I then said, 'I think I belong to the tribe of Joseph.' At once the rod pointed towards me; thus proving to my satisfaction that it was moved by the imagination of the person who held it. I felt anxious for the result of all this, but said little.

"At my next appointment in Poultney Brother Done met me there. He looked so very dejected I feared he had come for me to attend some funeral service for a friend. I asked for his family, and for the cause of his sorrow.

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'O,' said he, 'the judgments of God are abroad.' He then said they had determined to spend the next day as a day of fasting and prayer, and he desired me to go and be with them. Accordingly, accompanied by Mr. Yates and Esquire Wells, I went. When we arrived old Priest Wood was lecturing on the words, "Thy judgments are made manifest," Rev. xv, 4. When he closed I announced my appointment to preach at Mr. Done's that evening. I was asked to change the place to the one we were now in, as seats were there all ready. I consented. I went to Mr. D.'s to tea and found a great deal of secret maneuvering going on. To give them all freedom I went to the barn for a time. On my return, I found posted on the door, 'Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us.' I said nothing but went to my meeting. After preaching, several persons commenced holding up rods, and running from one end of the room to the other. I prepared to leave, when Bro. D. came to me much agitated, and expressed sorrow that I could not stay at his house that night. 'Where will I go?' I said. He replied, 'O, you will fare as well as the rest of us.' So I sat down. We were soon ordered to go to the house fixed up for the occasion -- a school room where they had made a large fire. They all came in much agitated many weeping. I found they were expecting there was to be an earthquake. I conversed with several respecting those that had the rods. They professed to have been converted, but all the evidence I could gain of the fact was that the rods would work in their hands. We sat there till

morning light. As morning dawned they went out and looking upward, kept working the rods. At last the old minister said: 'O, I told them I thought it would not be until tomorrow night.' Soon after light I went to Brother Done's and asked to take a nap. On passing through the parlor I found all the crockery setting in the middle of the floor. After sleeping, I was taking my breakfast, when two men came in and said they had found out the whole mistake. They had thought because the rods had directed them to have all their goods packed up, that there was to be an earthquake. But this was the 14th day of the first month, (it was the 14th of Jan.), and on the 14th day of the first month the children of Israel were directed to keep the Passover with shoes and hats on. So they were directed now to keep that day until they were prepared to go into the New Jerusalem. I made no remark, but concluded they had now something to work on to deceive the people.

"After eight weeks I had another appointment to preach in the same place. When I inquired of Brother Done respecting the rods, he seemed perfectly honest and sincere, but all in earnest and perfectly duped. He told me the rods were able invisibly to remove gold and silver. He said they had found that there was a vast quantity of it in the earth, and the rods could collect it to one place. They were now doing the work and expected to get enough to pave the streets of the New Jerusalem. I asked him if the gold came in its native state or in currency. He said in *both*. I then asked him if they had

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any person who understood refining gold. He said they had one who understood it perfectly well. 'Where is he,' I said. 'He keeps himself secreted in the woods,' he replied. I asked his name, and he told me it was Wingate. I remembered at once; it was the name of a man who was detected about two years before in Bradford, Vt., in milling counterfeit dollars. My father having been selectman of the town at the time, I had known the case well. After some reflection, I said to Brother Done, 'I fear there is counterfeiting going on, and if you are not careful I fear you will be drawn into it and your reputation and your family ruined.' He was alarmed. I said, 'I think I can tell you how to escape. If my fears are correct, they will call on you for sums of money, and will want it in specie.' He replied they had already done so. I advised him then to put away his rod and quit them, or he was a ruined man. Four weeks after that, when I returned, he told me he had not seen his rod since I left. I asked him to burn it. He replied his wife knew where it was, and left the room. She brought it and I burned it.

"I ascertained afterwards that the eldest son of Priest Wood, called Captain Wood, was the principal religious mover in sight while Wingate kept concealed. Wood was Wingate's outside agent, and got up the religious excitement to aid the scheme."

The foregoing was penned by a friend for Mr. Clark, as will appear from the following, which accompanied the same in Mr. Clark's own hand.

The conclusion of this whole affair is that Wingate, mentioned by Mr. Clark, and Winchell, as he called himself, were one and the same; and that he was a counterfeiter hiding from justice, and that this affair was inaugurated for the purpose of covering some further scheme of counterfeiting. Whether the Woods were privy to this feature of the business, if it existed, seems to be in uncertainty. It is more probable, perhaps, that their part in the affair was more intimately associated with the religious fanaticism and projects of the elder Wood; and that when Winchell came on the scene with his "rod," they seized upon it for their own purposes. Previous to the beginning of this imposition with the rod, the testimony is to the effect that the Woods were respectable members of the community, and some of them were very able men; Jacob Wood was elected one of the selectmen at the first meeting after the town was organized; Ephraim was elected constable at the first annual meeting and several times afterward; Nathaniel, jr., was probably the superior of all the Woods in ability and culture; he represented the town in the Legislature several successive years; was for a long period the active justice of the peace here; was town clerk several years and held other offices. He was father of Reuben Wood, who studied law with Jonas Clark, went to Cleveland, Ohio, about 1817, obtained a large practice and was made a judge of the Supreme Court of that State, and later governor. After the collapse of the "earthquake" the Wood families soon removed from Middletown to Ellisburg, N. Y., and it is said became excellent citizens.

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As to Mr. Clark's opinion that this Wood movement gave rise to the Mormon doctrines of Joe Smith, there seems to be a good foundation for it. The two "religions" were much the same at the start; the father of Joe Smith lived in Poultney at the time of the Wood affair and had a hand in it; Winchell went from here to Palmyra, N. Y., where Joe Smith's Mormon religion obtained its first substantial footing; it has been said that Oliver Cowdry's father was in the "Wood scrape," and he afterwards went to Palmyra and there Winchell and himself, and later their sons, engaged in searching for money with the hazel rod. We cannot devote more space to detailing the evidences that the seeds of Mormonism, at least, were planted in Middletown; but the foregoing are the stronger points of the proof and are thought to be quite convincing. We have not sufficient ill-will

towards Middletown to care to make the proof any stronger.

Excerpts from Arthur B. Deming's 1888
Naked Truths About Mormonism



Vol. I: No. 1 (Jan. 1888.)

[p. 1, col. 6]

ABOUT SPAULDING.

SOLOMON SPAULDING was born in 1761, in the town of Ashford, Connecticut, U.S.A. When a student in Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, from which he graduated, he became much interested in what became of **the lost ten tribes of Israel**, and imbibed the views of one of the officers of the college, that the American Indians were most probably their descendants. He entered the ministry, and for ten years preached about the country as an evangelist. He never was a settled pastor. He wrote a manuscript on a few quires of letter paper, purporting to be an account of the wanderings and arrival in America of the lost ten tribes (similar to the "Book of Mormon"), probably while he preached in Middletown, Vermont. (See statement of Salmon S. Osborn and Judge Frisbie's letter)...

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[p. 2, cols. 1-2]

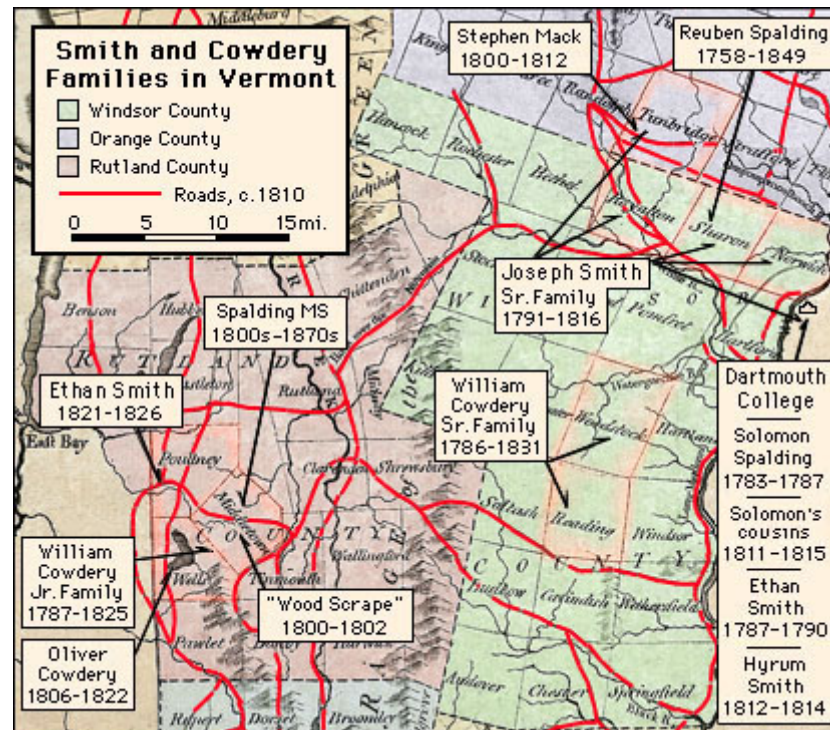
S. S. OSBORN'S STATEMENT.

Mr. A. B. Deming, Esq. -- Dear Sir: According to your request I hand you a statement of my recollections of the Mormons, and of the "Manuscript" I saw in Vermont... In September, 1871, I spent some little time in Middleton, Vt., with my wife and her sister, who were both invalids. We had rooms and board at Hezekiah Haynes'. When he learned we were from the vicinity of Kirtland, O., inquiries were made about the Mormons, and I was then told about what they termed the Wood scrape, and that Mormonism undoubtedly originated in that town, and that Mr. Woodard (I think the name was), the Town Clerk, had a "Manuscript" written by Spaulding, which might throw some light on the subject, as **he believed Spaulding's writings and the religious fanaticism of the Woods' gave rise to Mormonism**. From him I learned also, that the Hon. Reuben Wood, late of Cleveland, Ohio, one of the clearest headed lawyers and best of Ohio's Judges, was a descendant of the same Wood, of Middleton, and himself read law there. I then became interested to know more about it. Soon afterwards I had occasion to call on the Town Clerk, who was also a shoemaker, for a little of his mechanical skill, and procured from him a sight of the manuscript and the rather reluctant loan of it on my promise to use it carefully and return it to him. As I now remember it was written in a fair, plain hand, upon foolscap; short-cap I think, and there may have been one quire or more or less of it stitched together: it purported to be an account of the journeyings of the ten lost tribes of Israel to America, and what they did and became on this continent, by Solomon Spaulding. I had abundance of

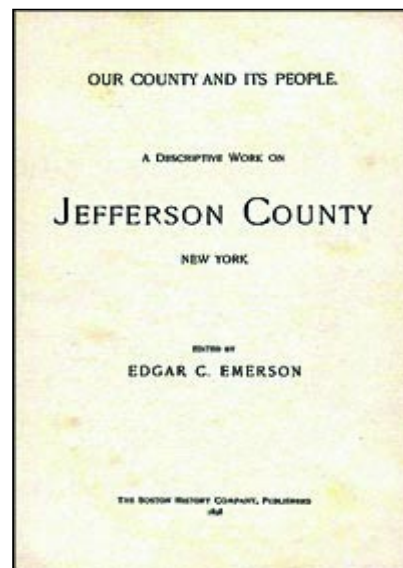
leisure in Middleton and kept the document a week or more, and returned it to Mr. Woodard. I did not read all of it. It did not interest me much, and I have no distinct recollection of the story, nor had I then read the "Book of Mormon," having lost mine soon after I used it in Chardon, as before stated. I practiced law in Chardon from 1828 to 1833 or '34 and afterwards in Painesville until 1849.

S. S. OSBORN.

Note: For another possible connection between Solomon Spalding and the Poultney-Middletown area, see the [1887 communication](#) from the Rev. Ethan Smith's grandson, asserting that Rev. Smith was acquainted with Solomon Spalding. Solomon was a distant relative of the Joseph Spaulding who helped settle the Middletown area.



Excerpts from E. C. Emerson's *Our County
and Its People: A Descriptive Work on
Jefferson County New York* (1898)



[[p. 573](#)]

THE TOWN OF ELLISBURGH.

In many respects the history of this town is unlike that of any other civil division of Jefferson county. From its very earliest settlement, more than an hundred years ago, Ellisburgh has been, in a measure, and independent town, and has made

history different from surrounding towns True, it was a part of the Macomb purchase, and on April 11, 1796, agent Constable contracted to sell to Marvel Ellis, of Troy, all the lands, except a certain marshy tract along Sandy creek, and a three thousand acre tract in the southwest corner which was reserved for Brown and Eddy. The Ellis purchase, according to Medad Mitchell's survey made in August, 1795, was 51,840 acres, but on resurvey by Benjamin Wright it was found to contain 52,834 acres. Constable deeded the land to Ellis on March 22, 1797, the sum of \$22,111.50 having been paid down and a mortgage of \$98,943.45 being given for the balance. In later years this mortgage became a serious cloud on the title, and by reason of Ellis' subsequent insolvency was the cause of delaying settlement. However, in 1802 Constable foreclosed the mortgage, but died before the proceedings were terminated. Thereupon his executors, James Constable, John McVickar and Hezekiah B. Pierrepont, prosecuted the action to final judgment, and the Ellis purchase was sold at the Tontine Coffee house in New York, on March 1, 1804, to one McCormick, who the next day conveyed the tract to the executors...



From an 1817 New York State Map (detail supplied by Thomas L. Revere)

Ellisburgh is in Jefferson County -- and *not* in St. Lawrence County
For location of Woodville & North Big Sandy Cr., see [1829 map](#)

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...There were, according to early authorities, many other fortified places and remains of encampments in this town, but unfortunately no record

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of their location has been preserved, and it is now impossible to furnish detailed descriptions of the same. Notwithstanding the many difficulties attending an attempt to locate and describe all these various works at the present time, recent investigators have succeeded in discovering remains of fortifications or villages which were unknown to the earliest settlers. Louis F. Hudson, within a very recent time, has discovered one of these on the south bank of Sandy creek, but has not made a sufficient examination to determine its true character. Dr. Chapman, another interested student of the aboriginal occupation, mentions an Indian village south of the Lake View house, on Wood's Point; another between Rural Hill and Belleville, on Col. Littlefield's farm; another northeast of that last mentioned, on the J. E. Green place; another between Belleville and Taylor settlement, in a tract of woodland on the Hungerford farm, the outline being still discernible; another (a fort) between that last mentioned and the Taylor settlement, which was undoubtedly a large structure.

In the early days of the town there was a tradition that **Capt. Kidd's treasures were buried in these aboriginal mounds along the north branch of Sandy creek**, resulting in much digging by weak-minded people for their recovery.

The proprietors of these speculations **with divining rod in hand would pretend to locate the treasures**, and then silly dupes would dig for them, and just as the coveted prize was almost within their grasp would be frightened away by ghosts and demons, leaving their tools behind. The digging was always done at night and not a word was to be spoken, as the slightest cough was supposed to bring on demons and goblins and to be fatal to success. ...

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... In some respects the early settlement of Ellisburgh was peculiar and seemed to begin at the established centers, of which the town has several, and then work out

into the surrounding and more remote territory toward the boundaries. Of the centers of settlement and milling operations, Ellisburgh was of course the oldest in the town, and owed its existence to the beginnings made in 1797-8. The earliest settlers in each of these localities will be recalled in our allusion to the villages themselves, but of those who came and shared the privations and hardships of pioneer life in the town at large a brief mention is appropriate. Isaac Wodell, whose surname has ever since been preserved in the town by representative citizens, worked for a time for Lyman Ellis and then removed to a farm tract of 340 acres a short distance west of Ellisburgh village. He was a worthy developer, building up a fine farm and property for his thrifty descendants. In his family were five sons and four daughters. Gideon Howard located about half a mile south of the village and was one of the first settlers in the town (1797 or '98). Paul Dickinson settled in the town about 1800. Among the other pioneers and settlers not before mentioned, may be named

Ebenezer Wood (from whom Woodville was named), Mosley Wood, Edward Boomer (the first town supervisor), Elder Joshua Freeman (1801), Jonathan Dealing (in the northeast part of the town), John Miner (near Ellis village). Philip Martin, Benj. Martin, Daniel Rounds, Matthew Boomer, Edward Barney (an old revolutionary patriot), Joseph McKee (for whom McKee's landing was so called), Guy Harris, William Williams (grandfather of Judge Pardon C. Williams, and who settled between Mannsville and Ellisburgh previous to 1812), Pardon T. Whipple (a Rhode Islander, who settled near the landing on Sandy creek in 1803), Samuel Bemis (one of the pioneers of Wardwell settlement), Benjamin Bemis (a prominent man in the town for many years), Simeon Daggett, Stephen Lindsay, Jonathan Matteson (an old revolutionary soldier), Chester McLean, David Holley, Samuel Dean, John Kibling, Avery Downer, Truman Steele, Clement Tubbs, Henry Green, Paul Dickerson (a cooper), Wm. Ellsworth, Theron Holley, Thomas W. Kennedy, Enos Eastman, John Otis, John Tuft (an old hotel keeper), **Ephraim Wood,** Ozias Lee, Capt. Fairchild, Benjamin Grenell, Amaziah Fillmore and perhaps others, all of whom are believed to have settled in the town previous to the war of 1812-15, and nearly all of whom took part in that eventful struggle at Sandy creek, which was fought within the limits of this town. ...

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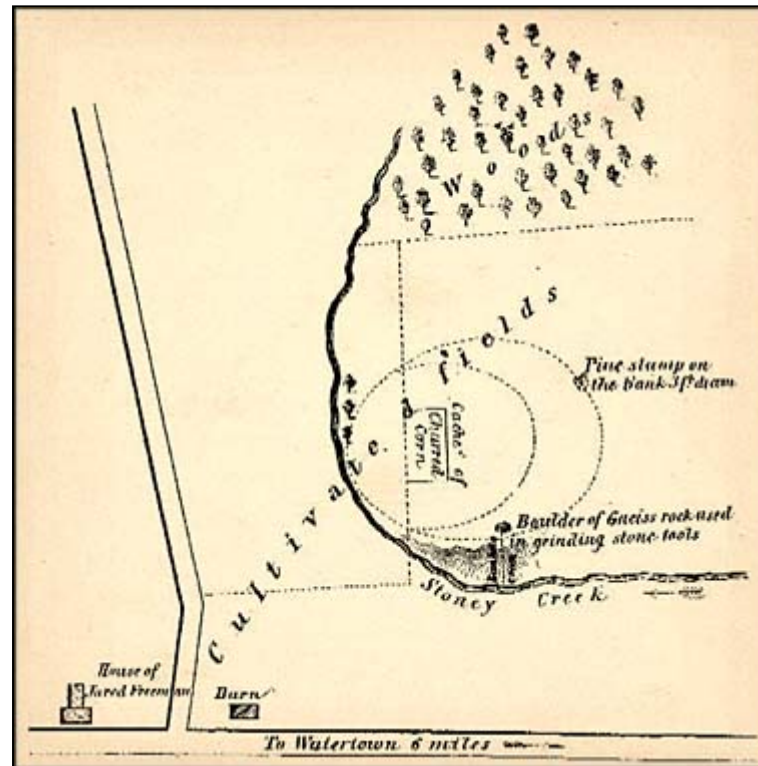
... *Woodville* is a small village on the north branch of Sandy Creek, about three miles from its mouth, and about two and one-half miles from Ellisburgh village. The locality was **originally called Wood's settlement, from the fact that Ebenezer,**

Ephraim and Jacob Wood, sons of Nathaniel Wood, a Vermonter, made an improvement in this part of the town in the spring of 1804. Nathaniel Wood, in company with Oramel Brewster, Simeon Titus, Ephraim Wood, jr., and Hezekiah Leffingwell, came to explore the region in 1803, and were so well pleased with the land that in May, 1804, the Woods purchased a 754 acre tract, paying therefor \$2,294.80. In the same spring the settlement was made, Ephraim Wood leading the way with his daughter and three sons. The father, who was **Rev. Nathaniel Wood, and one of the most earnest and devout men among the pioneers of the town, came in June, 1804,** and was soon after followed by Obadiah Kingsbury, Oliver Scott and others. In the next year three other members of the Wood family (Nathaniel, jr., Ebenezer and Mosely) and Samuel Truesdale, and the families of each, were added to the little community. In this year these industrious settlers built a small saw mill on the creek, and planted a field of corn on the marsh, which is said to have produced one of the most abundant crops ever grown in the town...

...

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Aboriginal Traces. -- In Rodman are still discernible traces of the Indian occupation. Near the residence of Edward Dillon (formerly Jared Freeman,



From 1898 Jefferson Co. History (detail supplied by Tom Revere)

and so marked on the accompanying diagram) is an interesting aboriginal work. It is located on lot No. 1, on the farm of the late

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Royal Fuller, in a gently sloping field near a small tributary of Stony creek. A plan of this work was made in 1850 under the direction of Mr. Freeman, who was familiar with it when every part was distinctly visible, and the following description was then made: It consists of a double bank, with an intervening crescent-shaped space, and a short bank running down to the stream. The latter may have been the remains of a beaver dam, or a covered way to the water. Beaver dams were common on the stream, but this had not their general appearance. Within the enclosure there was plowed up a large quantity of corn, which was found scattered over an area of about one rod by eight rods. It appeared as if charred by fire or exposure to the elements. This spot must have been an immense

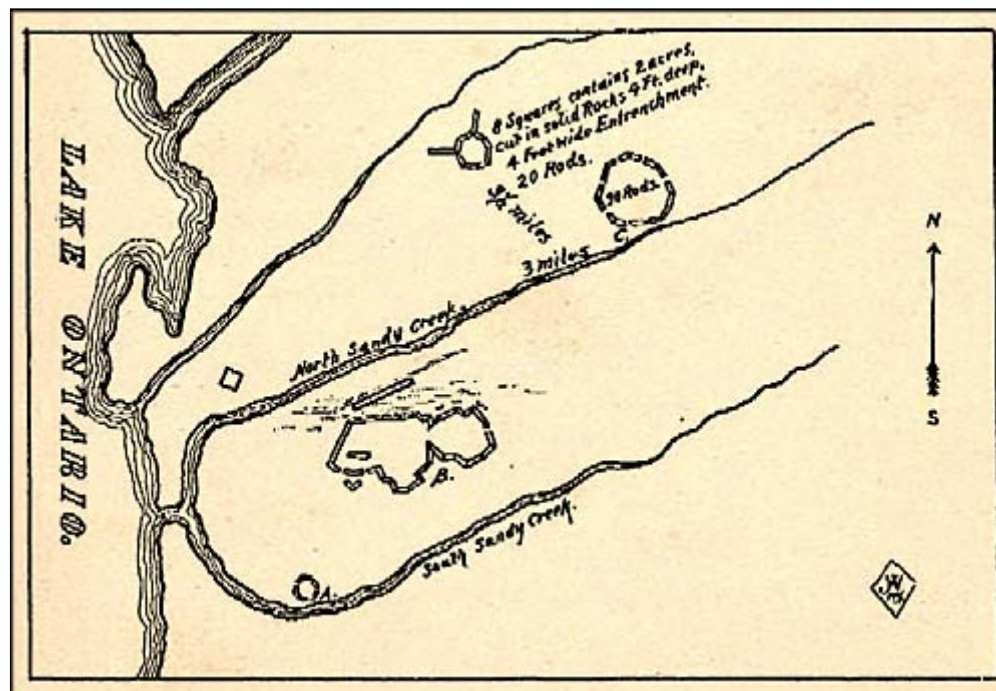
cache, or place for concealing corn. In all several hundred bushels were revealed by the plow. Charred corn was not found elsewhere, though adjoining fields furnished large quantities of stoneware and earthenware fragments. Just inside the enclosure is a large bowlder of gneiss rock, in which may be seen two or three broad yet shallow depressions, doubtless worn by grinding stone implements. These smooth depressions were twelve inches across, and from one to two inches deep. No other part of the mass presented a like smooth surface. Directly upon the mound stood a pine stump three feet in diameter.

Another description of the same work made about the same time is as follows: The work occupied a high oval-shaped hill, one side of which was very steep, while the other descended gently to the level ground. An embankment extended in a semi-circular form around that part of the hill which was not naturally protected. Originally the embankment was more than six feet high from the bottom of the trench, but now a slight depression alone remains. Formerly there was an avenue leading to the westward, but this is no longer traceable. A huge bowlder is at the base of the hill, and in it are several depressions, with several grooves, indicating use for sharpening tools by rubbing them to the required edge or form. (*Aboriginal Monuments of New York*. by B. G. Squier, published in 1849 in Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge.)

Traces of this work are yet visible by darker colored streaks of earth, and a richer hue to vegetation, and the locality is known as "fort hill." The stone bowlder, with its depressions, still remains as a monument to the aboriginal occupation.

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There are the remains of another ancient fortification on the farm of Albert Heath, on lot No. 25 in Rodman. This work is situated on the north bank of the north branch, about half a mile above the confluence of that stream with Sandy creek. The position seems to have been selected with much care, and was well adapted for defensive operations. It lies upon a point of land elevated about twenty feet above Sandy creek, with a marsh in the rear, out of which flows a small stream of water.



From Emerson's 1898 Jefferson Co. History (detail supplied by Tom Revere)
The structures between the creeks are half way between Woodville and Ellisburg.

This stream works its way through a ravine, about ten feet deep, into the north branch. The work itself was about 90 rods in circumference, and enclosed about three acres of land. The soil has been under cultivation about seventy-five years, and but few traces of the works now remain, though its general course may be determined by a richer and more luxuriant shade to the vegetation. The usual Indian relics have been found strewn over the ground (which were exhumed by the plow), such as skinning knives, broken pottery, pipe bowls and stails and the other et cetera of such encampments. Some of the pipe bowls found were quite finely carved with images of animals, birds and fish. Human bones have also been exhumed from this place. A deposit of white sand and clay is found in the marsh which is thought to

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have been used in the manufacture of pottery. It is said that under the roots of a large maple in this enclosure was dug up the bones of a man of great stature and furnished with entire rows of double teeth.

There was a tradition many years ago of money having been buried in this fort, resulting in considerable digging for its discovery, some persons coming from a distance for that purpose.

Aside from its defensive position, this place was well calculated for an Indian encampment, as Sandy creek at this point was in early times plentifully stocked with salmon, it not being an infrequent occurrence to take a barrel of this fish from one hole....

Note 1: Tom Revere supplied the above excerpts from Emerson, along with a paraphrase evidently derived from the [writings of James Constable](#) (brother of William Constable) partially published in 1854 on pages 157-58 of Franklin B. Hough's *A History of Jefferson County*:

"The aboriginal remains of Ellisburgh, have given occasion for the weak minded to believe, that they were in some way concerned with buried treasures, and this being confirmed by the supposed indications of the divining rod, led in early times to explorations for them, despite of the guardianship of the spirits of the murdered, who according to the most approved demonologists, are ever placed sentries over concealed coffers. The projectors of these speculations were in some instances charged with making money out of the credulous victims of superstition, by selling provisions, and in several instances, the diggers were almost frightened out of their senses by ghosts and demons; some got fleeced of substantial property in pursuit of imaginary wealth, and others lost the respect of sensible men, by the favor with which they regarded these follies. On a certain occasion in preparing the enchanted circle for digging, a lamb was sacrificed, to appease the guardian demons of the supposed treasure; but this act was generally regarded as a sacrilege, and did much towards bringing discredit upon these heathenish orgies. -- It is humiliating to know, that at a period so recent, and in a locality that enjoyed the means of education as early as any in the county, such absurdities of belief in witchcraft should have prevailed, nor is consolation afforded in the fact, that in other sections, and at the present day, we daily witness the evidences of a belief in superstitions quite as absurd. Incidents might be given, and details related, of the ritual observed by these midnight seekers for subterranean gold, but the narratives would be unprofitable, and can not be too soon forgotten..."

Hough did not specifically attribute the early money-digging in Ellisburgh Township to the Nathaniel Wood family -- perhaps out of respect for "Reuben Wood, late governor of Ohio," whom Hough identified as "a son of Nathaniel Wood" on page 160 of his book. The use of a "divining rod," in these "speculations" almost certainly points to the Wood family as participants in the hoax, and probably as its perpetrators. This conclusion is strengthened by Emerson's 1898 reporting of the early money-digging as having occurred on the "north branch of Sandy creek;" which was where Woodville was

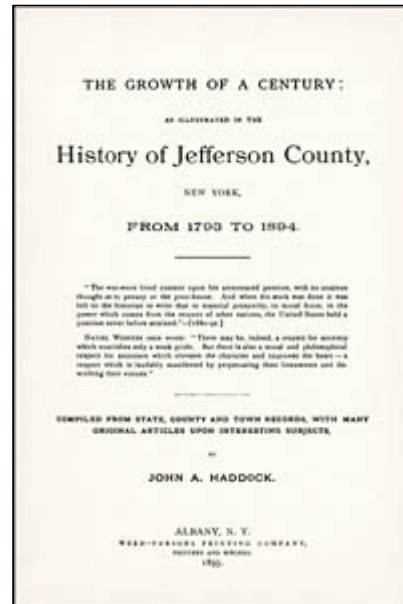
located.

Note 2: The mound-builder "fort" mentioned on Emerson's page 771 was located in Rodman Township, upstream from Woodville. The "considerable digging" conducted there in early times may have been initiated by the Wood family, as Emerson says "some persons" came "from a distance" to carry on the treasure search there. The Wood family moved to the area in 1803, after the failure of their predicted earthquake in Middletown, Vermont in January of 1801. On page 587 Emerson says: "Nathaniel Wood [Jr.]... Ephraim Wood, jr., came to explore the region in 1803, and were so well pleased with the land that in May, 1804, the Woods purchased a 754 acre tract, paying therefor \$2,294.80. In the same spring the settlement was made, Ephraim Wood leading the way with his daughter and three sons. The father, who was Rev. Nathaniel Wood, and one of the most earnest and devout men among the pioneers of the town, came in June, 1804." While the Wood family members' move to Ellisburg Township was credited to their being "well pleased with the land," they may have also envisioned some lucrative potential in the area's mound-builder ruins -- and may themselves have been the "persons" who came "from a distance" to engage in money-diggings efforts there.

Note 3: The early Mormon missionaries demonstrated an interest in the Jefferson County region and obtained some success there. William H. Whitsitt went so far in [his speculations](#) as to envision "Certain family connections of Joseph Smith, Sr." living in adjacent St. Lawrence County, providing "a desirable base for any operations which young Joseph [Smith] might see fit to undertake in that section of the world," and as the hopeful scene for introducing a fantastic "book found, in a hollow tree" in nearby Canada. John A. Haddock, in his [1895 volume](#), *History of Jefferson County*, published a less hypothetical account (provided by William Fayal) of Mormonism's introduction in that vicinity:

"Early in the thirties, the missionary zeal of the Mormon hierarchy at Kirtland, Ohio was stimulated to unwonted activity... [and] the favored point and termination of the pilgrimages seemed to be at Theresa [near the border with St. Lawrence Co.]. That Village was but a day's drive from Sackets Harbor, where those coming in schooners from Kirtland, on Lake Erie, were landed. It was, besides, the home of the Pattens and of Warren Parish... The first influx of Mormon missionaries from Kirtland was quiet and unheralded, at least in Theresa. But their doings and the miracles alleged to have been performed, soon noised around... [a decade later] a brief revival occurred in Theresa... About the year 1848 there arrived in the village the prophet and revelator, Strang... The followers of Sidney Rigdon were small in numbers... some time before his [Rigdon's] death, he sent an affecting letter to the head of the Church at Salt Lake, urgently requesting to be taken back into the fold... No person of much social standing or mental caliber joined the Mormons."

Excerpts from John A. Haddock's
History of Jefferson County (1895)



WOODVILLE.

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A small village on North Sandy creek, about three miles from its mouth,
formerly Wood's Settlement, was settled by Ebenezer, Ephraim and Jacob

Wood, sons of Nathaniel Wood, of Middletown, Vermont, who came in to look for lands with Orimal Brewster, Simeon Titus, Ephraim Wood, Jr., and Hezekiah Lefflingwell, in the fall of 1803. Messrs. E. & E. Wood purchased, May 26, 1804, for \$2,294.80, a tract of 754 acres, and in March, Ephraim Wood, with a daughter and three sons, came in to make a home, his brother Ebenezer remaining to settle the estate.

Rev. Nathaniel Wood, their father, an old man, came on in June, 1804.

Obadiah Kingsbury, Oliver Scott, and others, came the same year. A small mill was built, and in 1805 got in operation. In 1805, Ebenezer Wood, Nathaniel Wood, Jr., (Reuben Wood, afterwards Governor of Ohio, and later a resident of Valpariso, South America, was a son of Nathaniel Wood), Mosely Wood, Samuel Truesdale, and families came in, and several young men. A field of corn was planted by the Woods on the marsh, as late as June 7, producing an immense yield, which greatly raised the reputation of the settlement and the hopes of the settlers.

When the Woods came in they followed the old Redfield turnpike into Adams, and the balance of the way cut their own road. The mill spoken of above was built by them. A paper-mill was built here about 1846 by the Messrs. Clark, and is still standing.

Oliver Batcheller, an old resident in Woodville, came here from Stratton, Windham county, Vermont, in the winter of 1808-09. He had been here the year previous and examined the country, and the general aspect being favorable, he made the location as mentioned. He was but 22 years old at the time. In 1815 he married Polly, a daughter of Ebenezer Wood.

Soon after Mr. Batcheller settled at Woodville, he built a blacksmith-shop on the ground now occupied by the store, at the south end of the bridge. He afterwards moved a short distance up the creek, and built a second shop and put up a triphammer. His first shop was the first one in the village.

The first attempt at merchandising in the village, was made by Ebenezer Wood, who brought in a few such goods as were necessary for the use of the settlers. This was soon after he came, and in the spring of 1809, he had a few articles still on hand. The first regular store, however, was opened by Nathan Burnham, who settled here in 1812, and carried on the business for some time. The first hotel was kept by Ebenezer Wood, in his dwelling,

which stood directly in front of the spot occupied by the residence of Nathaniel Wood. The present hotel was built for a dwelling, probably by Nicholas Meade, a shoemaker, and converted into an hotel some time afterward.

A school was taught in the village previous to the War of 1812.

A postoffice was established some time between 1820 and 1830, previously to which time the people had received their mail at Adams, Ellis village and other places. The first postmaster was Asa Averill; the second was Augustus Victor Wood, who occupied the office for 17 years...

THE MORMONS AT THERESA.

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Responding to an urgent request, Mr. William Fayel, of St. Louis, has furnished the following interesting article relating to the Mormon raid upon the people of Theresa and the towns adjoining. Those who have ever resided in the northern part of the county, will not need to be told who Mr. Fayel is. He was born at Butternuts, Otsego county, N. Y., but his early life was passed at Theresa, to which town his father removed early in 1831. After some experience with journalism at Lockport, N. Y., he removed to St. Louis, and is well known to all the older settlers there....

Mr. Fayel never presents any subject that he does not adorn. He has the distinct newspaperman's reaching out after "news," and his war correspondence, during the time he served his paper (the St. Louis Republican) in the field, as well as his connection afterwards with the several Indian commissions sent out by the government, made him well known as an able writer and a historian all through the unbounded West and South. He was an early friend and companion of that Henry M. Stanley, whose researches in the Dark Continent have made him worldfamous. Mr. Fayel says:

Early in the thirties, the missionary zeal of the Mormon hierarchy at Kirtland, Ohio, was stimulated to unwonted activity through numerous revelations alleged to have been received by the prophet, Joseph Smith. In a

revelation given in August, 1831, Smith himself, with Sidney Rigdon and Oliver Cowdery were commanded to go to the land of the Missouri, "even unto the borders of the Lamanites," (the native Indians), and establish the Zion. Missourians were also sent to the East and to the Southward. In a revelation given in January, 1832, a large delegation was named "to take their journey into the eastern countries, going from house to house and from village to village," proclaiming the doctrines of the new faith. Among the number specially named were: Orson Hyde, Samuel H. Smith, Orson Pratt, Lyman Johnson, John Murdock, Eden Smith, Jared Carter, Sidney Gilbert, Wm. W. Phelps and Perley [sic] P. Pratt, some of whom belonged to the "high priesthood of Melchizedek" and the Aaronic or Levitical, and others to the "Order of the Seventies." Others were added to the list; some going to Albany and Boston, while towards the Northwest, the favored point and termination of the pilgrimages seemed to be at Theresa.

That village was but a days' drive from Saekets Harbor, where those coming in schooners from Kirtland, on Lake Erie, were landed. It was, besides, the home of the Pattens and of Warren Parish, who soon became leading lights of the Mormon sect. David Patten, a swarthy champion of the faith, held a debate in defense of his religious sect, with Elder Phelps, a Methodist preacher, in the old school-house at the west end of the village. Patten was voluble in argument and Scripture quotations, while Phelps indulged in a strain of ridicule, such as squinting through his fists, in imitation of Joseph Smith's peering through his "Urim and Thummim stone" while decyphering the hieroglyphic characters of the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. Patten, known in Missouri as "Captain Fear Not," from his conceded bravery, was subsequently engaged in battle with State troops, called out by Governor Boggs to put down the Mormon insurgents. Warren Parish, of Theresa, belonging to a respectable family, sold out his farm in the Deacon Still neighborhood, disposed of his stock, and joined

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the Mormons at Kirtland. He acted as clerk, in 1835, to the General Assembly of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, where the covenants of their faith were adopted by an unanimous vote. His sister married Thompson Brooks, at whose house his venerable father died, true to his early faith, in despite of the influence of his erring son. His remains were taken to his farm in Pamela for burial, followed by a long cortege in sleighs, in charge of

Gen. Archibald Fisher.

Before advertng to the inroad of the Mormon disciples into this supposed rich field for proselytism, it may be well to allude to another circumstance that possibly influenced the attention of the saints hitherward. In the winter of 1832, a bright, talented young man named Alanson Pettingell, of Otsego county, N. Y., visited Theresa, and stopped a few days with Capt. Nathaniel Lull, whose wife had boarded, while teaching school at Butternuts, at Deacon Pettingell's, the father of Alanson, and the old acquaintance was pleasantly renewed. Young Pettingell meanwhile visited Plessis, Alexandria Bay and other points, taking observations, and posting himself, particularly in regard to the religious situation. It afterwards turned out that he had joined the Mormons, and that most of his own neighbors had gone daft on the subject, but while in Theresa he made not the least avowal of his sentiments. He turned up soon afterward at Kirtland, and there is reason to believe this information obtained during his northern tour was duly appreciated and acted upon. Pettingell became a leading spirit among his associates, and prospered. He became president of a bank, which gathered in considerable funds, but being unchartered, it was unable legally to collect its loans, and naturally failed. Pettingell, when the crash came, was killed during the resulting tumult. The first influx of Mormon missionaries from Kirtland was quiet and unheralded, at least at Theresa. But their doings and the miracles alleged to have been performed, soon noised around. They talked in unknown tongues (gibberish), and claimed to heal the sick by the "laying on of hands," and even to restore the dead to life. The people marveled, as they did of old. There are some still alive, who can recall the absurd pretensions of these impostors and the wonder excited by the miracles alleged to be witnessed by the dupes, but which happened almost invariably at a distance, in the remote settlements. Some believed, others doubted, or half believed in the supposed revival of the apostolic age. Several conversions were announced. Ira Patten, a cabinet maker, was enrolled among the first converts. Among other converts were Uncle Jerry Cheeseman, his son Alonzo and wife, who was a Rulison, and the Cooke family, with a mother-in-law, Mrs. Robinson, recently from Massachusetts. Other and more obscure persons were added to the list. Some accessories were made in the Parker Settlement, where several remarkable cures were reported. **The case of a fever-stricken boy, Thomas Gale, who was restored by miraculous interposition, was cited as a remarkable instance in proof of supernatural power.** This case, however, was too preposterous to obtain

extended credit, even among the believers.

As fast as new converts were made, they were baptised in the murky waters at the Indian Landing, in the sunken gorge below the falls. The baptismal services in this respect did not differ materially from that of Scriptural times. Truth compels us to say that the converts were taken mostly from those belonging to the Methodist connection, as the Mormons, in common with the Methodists, held to similar ground regarding the atonement and mediation of Jesus Christ, and it therefore seemed to them only a leap forward by which they landed these misguided converts in the Mormon citadel. After the fervor of novelty had worn away, the membership of the Mormon church fell away rapidly or came to a standstill.

From time to time, fresh deputations of Missourians arrived with a view of infusing new life and enlarging the Mormon membership. One day in June, about 1836, while the villagers were working on the road near the Fayel farm, an open barouche passed by, containing six spruce-looking gentlemen, wearing green goggles, one of whom was reading from an open book for the edification of his companions. They proved to be gentlemen of culture and of scholarly attainments, far superior to the coarse yet vigorous expounders of the faith who had preceded them. Their inquiries were answered, and such information given as the case demanded, by DeGras Salisbury, the pathmaster.

One of these proved to be Perley P. Pratt, the distinguished Hebrew scholar, who, many years afterwards, was assassinated in Arkansas. Under the ministry of these more crafty men, the age of miracles was relegated to the rear as a lost art, and more rational modes were used to bring Gentiles into the fold. Mormonism lagged. For several years afterward, apostles came singly instead of in crowds, to search out and stir up the faithful. One day a stout apostle, wearing a linen duster, was seen coming down the road. Stopping at a hospitable farm house one mile south of the village, he was given supper and a night's lodging. He said he needed rest from his spiritual labors, and offered to chop cordwood for the Fayel boys, a labor evidently more handy to him than chopping logic. While engaged in chopping in the woods near the rapids of Indian river, loud yells were heard and splurging in the water. A man was soon seen wading to the shore. It proved to be uncle Rube Evans, who was wrecked on a raft of saw-logs that went to pieces in the boiling rapids. Yet this Mormon apostle had the assurance to tell uncle

Rube that if he had only known of

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his danger in time he could have stilled the waters, and he could have kept on harmless. Before night, by a glance of his axe, the apostle cut a severe wound in his foot, which bled profusely. He sat down on a log and said, like a mortal, despondingly, "What shall I do?" In view of the supernatural power claimed for him he might have been answered, "Physician, healthysself!" His supernatural power appeared of no avail, for his wound was only healed by Dr. Davison's sticking salve and a fortnight's confinement to his room. On his recovery he visited his friends of the Mormon faith, disciplined and dined with them and filled some appointments to preach; the last appointment being at the Hodge school-house on the Military road, where his audience embraced two wags, Ez. Hodge and Charley Woodruff. Mrs. James Pierce utterly prohibited her sons from attending what proved to be the farewell sermon of this despised apostle of Mormonism. Yet this man was a fair type of the lower order of the priesthood. He was apparently honest, ignorant, bigoted, and his claim to the possession of spiritual gifts may have been an honest conviction. But he was certainly more of a fool than a knave.

For years after this the progress of Mormonism subsided. Few accessions were added to the membership, and the interest once excited began to smack of the ancient chestnut. The spiritual warfare at last ended, and this branch of the Church of Zion suffered a lasting decadence, almost an "innocuous desuetude."

Afterwards, however, a brief revival occurred in Theresa, which in this imperfect sketch should not be overlooked. About the year 1848 there arrived in the village the prophet and revelator, Strang, and he ordered a three-days' conference of all the faithful throughout the adjoining region. Strang was originally a young lawyer from Western New York, and was known throughout the country as the leader of the faction denominated "the Strangites." After the death of Joseph Smith and the breaking up at Nauvoo, the Mormons became divided into three factions, the "Twelveites," the "Rigdonites" and the "Strangites." The "Twelveites," under their able leader, Brigham Young, settled in the new territory of Deseret, and their subsequent history is known to all the world. The followers of Sidney Rigdon were

small in numbers, and their chief died some time ago, depressed by poverty and old age, in Western New York. He was one of the original founders of the sect, and its brightest literary adjunct. I was told by an Utah delegate that some time before his death, he sent an affecting letter to the head of the church at Salt Lake, urgently requesting to be taken back into the fold, saying that he wished to lay his bones amongst the people he loved so well, and desiring reinstatement in the faith of his first love. He asked that money might be sent to pay his transportation to Utah. The letter was submitted to the Council, who decided that they had no use for Rigdon, and his appeal was coldly declined.

Strang claimed to have a revelation from God, appointing him as the successor of the Prophet Smith. With his followers, he established various settlements, their headquarters being at Beaver Island, on Lake Michigan, near Mackinaw.

The conference Strang had ordered was held in the brick school-house at Theresa, crowning the highest elevation in the village. Besides the local membership, the audience was largely composed of pilgrims from St. Lawrence county and some of the adjoining towns. Business committees, usual with such bodies, were appointed, and Strang delivered painfully long and argumentative addresses. At the close of the conference, on the solicitation of Ira Patten, a so-called citizens' meeting was held in the parlors of Suel Wilson's tavern, at which a committee on resolutions was appointed, consisting of S. L. George, James Lawrence Bufford, J. A. Haddock and William Fayel. The resolutions, as reported, were sufficiently complimentary to Prophet Strang and the Conference to satisfy Mr. Patten, although regarded as a grand joke by most of those present and by the committee itself. An account of the flaming proceedings and a puff were sent to the Tribune newspaper, an organ of Strang's at Beaver Island, and when published 50 copies were transmitted to Theresa for distribution.

And now, after the lapse of 60 years since the advent of Mormonism into Theresa, and the extraordinary efforts made by the early missionaries towards its propagation, what evidence remains of its existence? If there are any visible signs there or in the country at large of this once pretentious sect, they are certainly not perpetuated in the shape of costly temples, fat parishes for the tithing man's toll, or even in cemeteries set apart to mark the repose of their sainted dead.

Some of the converts migrated West to join Mormon organizations; Alonzo Cheeseman died recently in Michigan, and Ira Patten, after some erratic wanderings, returned to Theresa, and was furnished money by Alexander Cooper to get back to his people.

Accompanying the above sketch by Mr. Fayel, he sent a letter in which he says, in continuation of this same subject:

No person of much social standing or mental caliber joined the Mormons. I went with father to Warren Parish's sales when he was about to join them in Illinois, and father bought of him that span of horses you so much admired and often rode after. About eight years ago I spent a day at Richmond, Ray county, Mo., with old David Whitmer, who, with Oliver Cowdery, wrote down, from the dictation of Joseph Smith, the original Mormon Bible. He had there

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the original manuscript of that Bible, it being owned by Cowdery until the latter died, his grave being at Richmond. The manuscript was written in a good round hand, on precisely such ruled foolscap as that whereon I learned to write at the Butternuts, and formed a book about two inches thick. I carried an introduction to Whitmer from old General Donophan, who commanded the historic Donophan expedition to New Mexico, put on foot by Col. T. H. Benton, Senator from Missouri. General Donophan was then alive and quite active. I also had letters from Senator Ferris and from Jake Child, late minister to Siam. At the time of my visit to Whitmer's house, there was also present Joseph Smith, Jr., son of the original Joseph, who is the head of what is called the re-organized Church of the Latter Day Saints. His brother was there, with two other elders of that branch. These men were comparing all the printed editions of the Bible with the original manuscript. They had charged omissions and interpolations on the Salt Lakers. These latter made special efforts to get hold of this manuscript, and a commission from Salt Lake offered thousands of dollars for it. But old man Whitmer would not part with it under any conditions. He watched the manuscript with the eyes of a lynx, and though feeble, he lay stretched on the bed beside the table, around which the Smiths were seated while examining the manuscript. While in New York in the thirties, Whitmer was the organ through which

several revelations were made. I showed him a book containing them, and asked if they were genuine. He waved his hand as if brushing the book away, and handing me the Mormon Bible, said that contained the truth and the only account to follow. I think his Bible a worthless jumble, but did not, of course, tell him so. I thought Whitmer a sly, cunning man, that would do anything for money, but I do not think he would sell his manuscript, as he claimed that his house was saved from the cyclone which struck Richmond the year before, simply on account of that Bible.

Mr. Whitmer's explanation of the circumstances that led to his separation from the Mormon leaders, who exercised an arbitrary control over their followers during the exciting times of the Mormon war in Missouri, and how he came to settle down in the then remote and secluded place, since developed by himself and Oliver Cowdery into the flourishing "city" of Richmond, was substantially as follows, as told to me by himself: He said that as the war against the State forces progressed and increased in bitterness, he foresaw the utter hopelessness of the unequal contest, and suggested some concession or compromise that would save the people from extermination. This, with some other matters of personal disagreement with the ruling powers, roused the jealousy and suspicion of the latter, and his life and liberty were jeopardized. At that critical junction any suggestion, or accommodation, or compromise with the enemy was regarded as treason by the arrogant and blood-thirsty Mormon leaders. They held secret church councils, in which suspected persons were tried on ex-parte evidence, without being present in person or by counsel, who, if declared guilty, were ordered to be shot from ambush or killed on sight. One day the council was in session, and Whitmer's case come up for trial. By a preconcerted agreement a friend was to signal the result from a window. Meantime Whitmer lay concealed in the bushes at some distance, awaiting the signal, which was to be the dropping of a willow twig to the ground. It was a case of life or death. On seeing the adverse signal deciding his fate, he mounted a horse, and fleeing through the woods and over the prairies across the country, he at length found a safe asylum in the spot which finally became his home, where he lived respected by his neighbors, until his death two or three years ago. After he made his escape he never joined the Mormon body, either at Nauvoo or Salt Lake, holding a plurality of wives in abhorrence. A little society of Mormons was formed, having started preaching, and he remained faithful to the last to Prophet Smith and the original Bible, of which, as stated, he held the manuscripts. With the re-organized saints,

under Joseph Smith, Jr., he seemed to affiliate, as they preached to the brotherhood, during my short stay in his house.

This somewhat lengthy, but intensely interesting chapter upon the Mormons would be incomplete if we did not state what we learned on the 1st of March, 1895, in a letter from William Fayel, now of St. Louis, the fact of the death of Daniel Patten, an old Theresa inhabitant, and one of the leaders among the Mormon proselytes. The ovation to his brother at Theresa was an event never to be forgotten, and a broad grin spreads over every face that was present there, whenever any allusion is made to a most comical proceeding, well carried out. A correspondent of the St. Louis Republican, writing from Lathrop, Mo., under date of February 6, 1895, and referring to the battle of Crooked River, fought with the Mormons by the citizens of Ray, Clay, Cadwell and Carroll counties, Mo., says: "In this fight David Patten, who was from Northern New York, and commander of the Mormons from the Far West, a settlement 16 miles northwest of Lathrop, was killed. He was called Capt. Fearnought, and had inspired his followers with valor. His men were armed with corn knives, which they used as sabres, and during the fight he was almost hacked to pieces."

In writing of these strange proceedings well remembered by those who were upon the stage during the thirties, the student of history is forced to regard them as belonging to a series of similar proceedings spoken of in the tales of other times.

Note 1: See also Marianne Perciaccante's "Backlash Against Formalism: Early Mormonism's Appeal in Jefferson County," in the *Journal of Mormon History* XIX:2 (1993). She mentions "county legends" regarding the activities of "1832 Mormon missionaries" in Jefferson County, citing Harry F. Landon's 1932 *The North Country*... pp. 299-300 for recollections regarding the missionaries attempts to walk on water and to cure "a feverish boy in Theresa." She then goes on to say: "The only corroborating evidence is that Brigham Young entered the United States from Kingston, Ontario, in 1832; a logical route would have been to land in Sackets Harbor by crossing Lake Ontario or to pass through Theresa *en route* from the St. Lawrence River, but the 1832 legend does not name Brigham Young." -- That is correct, but the "legend" does attribute an important proto-missionary role to Otsego County Mormon Alonzo Alanson Pettingill, who married Brigham Young's sister Susanna in 1846. His sister, Abigail Pettingill, was the wife of Elder Jacob Bump (originally from Butternuts, Otsego Co.; later lived in Meadville, Pennsylvania and Kirtland, Ohio) -- Linda S. Whiting's 2003 *David W. Patten: Apostle and Martyr* devotes two chapters to David's 1832-33 Mormon missions to "Pennsylvania and New York" and to "Jefferson County, New York." According to Whiting,

David, in company with a "Brother Lewis" arrived in Theresa early in May of 1833, where they were joined by missionaries Brigham Young and Jonathan Hampton. On May 20th Brigham Young and the other missionaries baptized Warren Parrish, along with several members of the Patten family (including David's brothers Archibald and Ira -- see note 2 below).

Note 2: It appears likely that William Fayel conflated some c. 1835-1836 Mormon missionary activities in the Watertown area, with the earlier transitory presence of elders like Orson Hyde and Samuel H. Smith (who passed through southern Onondaga County in May of 1832). Elders Orson Pratt and Lyman E. Johnson also traveled through New York State during the spring and summer of 1832. Pratt continued on to northern Warren County in February of 1833 and may have passed through Sackets Harbor on his return to Ohio. Along the way back to Kirtland he met up with Elder David W. Patten, originally from Jefferson County. David's brother, Ira J. Patten (later an apostle in William Smith's church) evidently remained Jefferson County until 1833, when he was baptized there by Brigham Young. David Patten was baptized a Mormon in Indiana in June of 1832 and immediately became a traveling preacher in company with Elder Joseph Wood (later the President of William Smith's Twelve Apostles and perhaps related to the "Wood Scape" family of Woods). It is possible that missionaries like Patten and Wood (or perhaps Zebedee Coltrin), ventured as far east as Jefferson County that winter. If so, none of these traveling elders could have lingered long enough for their activities in that region to give rise to "the 1832 legend." Rather, it was during the following spring of 1833 that Mormon missionaries first made a noticeable impact in Theresa and the surrounding countryside. And it must have been during subsequent years that, perhaps, some of the incidents reported by William Fayel transpired.

Note 3: The same "county legends" are mentioned in *Jefferson County Genealogy XII:1* (Apr. 11, 2002) which cites the *Watertown Daily Times* as a source. More likely the newspaper article there quoted was one published in the *Syracuse Sunday Herald* of [Dec. 11, 1898](#).

American Israelites: Part 3 (1818-1827) Mordecai M. Noah's Gathering of Israel



MORDECAI M. NOAH and ^{the} Mormon ZION

[Part 1: 30 Ararat-Mormon Parallels](#) [Part 2: Source Texts/Resources](#)
[Part 3: M. M. Noah & Oliver Cowdery](#) [Part 4: M. M. Noah & the Masons](#)

This section and its links is still under construction.

Introduction

"I, Mordecai Manuel Noah... by the grace of God, Governor and Judge of Israel, have issued this my proclamation, announcing to the Jews throughout the world that an asylum is prepared and hereby offered to them..."
(*M. M. Noah, 1825*)

Who Was Mordecai M. Noah and What Was His "Ararat"?

Major Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851) was a noted American journalist, playwright, diplomat, New York politician, and Jewish advocate. In 1825 this utopian proto-Zionist proposed and planned a gathering of the world's "Israelites" to western New York state in order to establish a great city and a powerful theocracy -- for the protection and advancement of God's "chosen people." Although the goals of Noah's 1825 project was never realized, many elements of his "City of Refuge" plan for the restoration of Israel were revived, Christianized, and implemented by the early Mormons in their own attempts to build a North American "Zion." The Mormons originally planned the building of their "City of Refuge" at Independence, Missouri, but that goal was beset by various obstacles and they moved its location -- first to Kirtland Ohio, then to Nauvoo, Illinois, and finally, to Salt Lake City in Utah.

Major Noah did not live to see his dreams for an Israelite gathering come true, either in the New World or in the Old. By the end of his life he, like the Mormons, had shifted his sacred geography but had not lost track of his original mission. Quietly abandoning his earlier hope to incorporate the American Indians into his Israelite utopia, Noah became a proto-Zionist whose eyes were finally fixed on Turkish Palestine as the proper place to gather his dispersed brethren. Mordecai M. Noah was not unaware of the Mormons' imitative gathering activity on their own behalf and for the restoration of the supposed Israelite Indians. As a newspaper editor he now and then directed a few choice words in the direction of these johnny-come-lately Saints, but mostly he simply chose to ignore them and their

Christianized mutation of his old Grand Island scheme. Had Noah himself taken more trouble to respond to the Mormons' zionic activities, perhaps their mimicry of his own failed "Restoration" would not have gone unnoticed for many decades. Noah avoided the chagrin of making such an admission and today practically everybody has forgotten both him and his land promotion of 1825. Now, 175 years later, the time has arrived for people to take a new look at Major Mordecai M. Noah and his proposed gathering of Israel to *"the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia,"* -- which he translated to read: "the land of the (American) Eagle!"

Biographical Sketch of M. M. Noah:

He was born in Philadelphia on July 19, 1785. His father was Manuel M. Noah, a Revolutionary War champion who had married Zipporah Phillips (of Portuguese Sephardic Jewish lineage) the year before. In 1795 Mordecai's mother died and he raised was thereafter primarily by her father, Jonas Phillips, a Prussian Jew who had immigrated to Charleston, South Carolina in 1756. While he was yet a young man the ever-ambitious Mordecai retraced his grandfather's footsteps to Charleston, where he hoped to study law, gain experience in journalism, and get a start in party politics. The youthful "Major" (in the Pennsylvania militia) found the both sensible and political climate in Charleston much to his liking and he was pleased to use his grandmother Phillips' Portuguese ancestry to establish himself socially among the aristocratic Sephardi of that city's [Congregation Beth Elohim](#). Unfortunately, Mordecai's stay in the South appears to have infected his thinking with less than appreciative opinions of ante-bellum Black people he encountered there. At the same time, and rather incongruently, he also became an outspoken southern journalist who championed both American democracy and the cause of Jewish people world-wide.

The verve and wit of Noah's patriotic "Mulek" articles in the *Charleston Times*, (generally supporting Madison's administration) did not go unnoticed in the capital city as the young nation entered the War of 1812. Noah's declared zeal on behalf of Madison's policies, a bold petition written to that same head of state, and an accompanying sheaf of recommendations from influential patrons (gathered as early as 1810-11) helped him gain an appointment as the U.S. Consul to the Kingdom of Tunis in 1813. The next year the administration sacked him, ostensibly for allowing his religious identity to color his dealings with the Moors and his free spending of government money in helping to free certain American

prisoners held at Algiers. A few months after this disappointment Mordecai moved to New York City, where he engaged in a letter-writing campaign to reestablish his good name, advanced his career in journalism, and continued to promote himself in partisan politics. Prior to his return to the city which had been a temporary home in his youth, the mature Mordecai had the good fortune to see his uncle, Naphtali Phillips, become the proprietor of the *National Advocate*, the favorite paper of New York's anti-Federalists and the political mouthpiece for that city's "Society of Tammany" (the regional political machine of the Democratic-Republicans). Mordecai soon became the chief editor at this prestigious enterprise, and he remained the editor (or an associate editor) at one or another of sundry New York publications for the remainder of his life.

In 1820 Major Noah declared his candidacy for Sheriff of New York and the following year received an appointment to the same, a post he held until losing that dignity amid the intra-party feuding accompanying the election of 1828. In the meanwhile Noah had shifted his political ground and in 1826 he resigned his editorship at what was by then George White's *National Advocate*. In 1829 the "Clintonian" clique within the New York Democratic-Republicans befriended the Major and handed him a political plumb: the office of Surveyor and Inspector of the Port of New York. During these Big Apple political squabbles in the 1820s Mordecai M. Noah progressed from being a declared "Bucktail" enemy of Governor [Dewitt Clinton](#), to tacitly supporting some Clintonian programs (such as the completion of the Erie Canal), to eventually allying with Clinton's Democratic faction in the 1829 campaign to send Andrew Jackson to the White House. Noah's political patron and mentor, Martin VanBuren, had accomplished some similar political footwork in order to become Jackson's running-mate. Throughout this entire period (whether as a collaborator with Tammany Hall or as its opponent) Major Noah remained an outspoken pro-slavery man and a chief adversary of the abolitionists.

Ever active in local Jewish affairs, Noah delivered what became a famous speech in 1818, when he helped supervise the consecration of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York City. Noah's speech related the history of Jewish persecution around the world and argued that the Jewish people must be established as a nation with their own government, in order to avoid future oppression. The rhetoric expressed by Noah's in his 1818 speech anticipated the problems of growing anti-Semitism in Europe and the precarious position of Middle-Eastern Jews standing on the sidelines of the Greek rebellion against the Turks. Major Noah's 1818 oration also foreshadowed his still undisclosed plan to

play midwife to a great gathering of Jews who might some day build an agrarian theocracy in upstate New York: "Jews must be turned aside from the crooked paths of traffic, miscalled commerce, to industry and agriculture..."

Mordecai M. Noah's 1818 call for a new program among the Jews was not just empty oration. By 1820 he was petitioning the New York Legislature to grant him an extensive parcel of land on Grand Island in the Niagara River, so that he might establish there a new Jewish homeland where "Israelites" of all types might find refuge and opportunity. Grand Island, along with several other, smaller islands located upstream from Niagara Falls theoretically became part of the United States in 1783, following the end of the Revolutionary War. The British troops stationed along the Ontario frontier continued to occupy the banks of the Niagara until 1796, when the Iroquois Nation claimed possession of the islands in the River. The State of New York recognized the Iroquois claim, but both the national and state governments were eager to take permanent possession of the area as the War of 1812 drew to a close. On September 12, 1815, in order to forstall any future Canadian attempt to seize this borderland property, New York paid the Iroquois \$1000 for Grand Island and its smaller insular neighbors. That minor bit of geographic news would eventually catch the imaginative attention of Mordecai M. Noah in New York City.

Following his 1826 political divorce from the Tammany Democrats who controlled the *National Advocate*, Noah left its editorial offices in July of that year and immediately founded his own, independent *New York Enquirer*. By early 1829 Noah had drifted into the camp of his previous rivals, the Clintonians, and that May he merged his newspaper with the *New York Morning Courier*, a anti-abolitionist Jacksonian paper previously published by men like John B. Skillman and James Gordon Bennett. At that time the *Courier* was managed by James Watson Webb. For several years he and Major Noah continued to operate the paper on good terms, but Noah's friendly feelings for Wood abated during the fight within the Democratic Party over whether or not to renew the charter of the United States Bank. Having finally abandoned his seven year alliance with the Jacksononians, Mordecai M. Noah drifted into the nascent Whig movement and in September of 1833 he again founded his own New York paper, supporting that growing political amalgamation. His new enterprise he called the *Evening Star*. This was an uneasy transformation on Noah's part and, although he won the friendship of partisans like Thurlow Weed of Rochester, the Major was never fully at home among the exuberant abolitionism and anti-Masonry which so frequently typified the early Whigs. Noah's career as an editor-publisher lasted until 1842

when the *Star* was discontinued. He managed to continue his career in journalism and politics to a degree, but all of that ended suddenly in 1851 when Mordecai died of a stroke. By that time Major M. M. Noah was arguably the best-known Jew in America.

Noah's 1825 Plans for the Gathering of Israel

As early as 1818 Mordecai Manuel Noah was of the opinion that there was no place in the Old World where Jews had a hope of achieving equality prior to their re-establishment in Israel at some time in the unknowable future. Instead, he turned his attention to the many advantages then available to settlers of all kinds in democratic America. Before 1820 Major Noah decided that the undeveloped western region of New York state offered the best promise for a successful relocation of his scattered people. Noah was not alone in pursuing this sort of idealistic proto-Zionism. The reigning Democrats of his day strongly favored an increased immigration into the young nation and the nationalistic yearning which was later to be called "manifest destiny" was already tempting some imaginative Americans to speak of importing organized companies of Jews to settle its western borderlands. More substantial plans were initiated by England and France to send some of their Jewish residents to proposed new homelands in the Caribbean or in Central America, but, for one reason or another, none of these programs were ever brought to fruition.

Noah's interest in Grand Island was probably sparked when New York Governor Clinton and his Attorney General, Martin Van Buren, implored the Legislature to authorize the removal of a couple hundred squatters who had taken up residence on the island after the Iroquois gave up their claims to the place in 1815. The Assemblymen in Albany passed the requested eviction act in April 1819 and empowered the Sheriff of Niagara County to organize the local militia and drive out the undesireables. This eviction was accomplished by the beginning of 1820. That same year the Legislature took up consideration of splitting off the Niagara region south of Buffalo and Grand Island in order to form a new county which could meet the needs of the expected population increase at the western terminus of the Erie Canal (then still under construction west of Rochester).

Mordecai M. Noah was both an informed journalist who kept close track of interesting news reports and an experienced politician who kept one ear attuned to any new developments coming out of Albany. He quickly recognized the unique

opportunity then arising on the big island downstream from Buffalo, and, seizing the opportunity, he petitioned the Legislature to grant him a land patent on the recently vacated island. Noah's move was premature and was probably doomed to failure in a Clinton-loving state Assembly which every year added new members from the growing west. The Clintonians on both the eastern and western ends of the state expected a lucrative western land development to follow the completion of the Erie Canal out to Buffalo by the mid-1820s. These political minds were not particularly inclined to dispose of large amounts of frontier property for a song. The anti-Clintonian big city Jew lost his bid to become chief proprietor of the uninhabited forests encircled by and unbridged river at the antipodes of eastern "civilization."

Major Noah was undaunted by this minor setback. Perhaps his land-grabbing attempt was more a publicity stunt than it was a true attempt to take possession of the island all by himself. The slow but inevitable progress of the Erie Canal westward matched the New York Jew's own measured evolution away from his old anti-canal rhetoric. He gradually came to the inescapable conclusion that this new waterway, extending from the Hudson to the Great Lakes, would make a huge, positive impact upon western New York. He saw Erie County created in 1821 and the subsequent commencement of construction at the western end of the canal in Buffalo. The plan then was to join this Buffalo segment of the canal to the westward extension, somewhere along the Niagara escarpment by 1825. A year before that date the boom-town of Lockport had sprung up at the junction point and the state surveyors had completed the sub-division of nearby Grand Island into dozens of 200 acre lots. Well before that time Major Noah had already formulated his plan to attempt the establishment of an Israelite colony on the island. By early 1825 he was deeply engaged in his selling this land development scheme to several of his friends and associates.

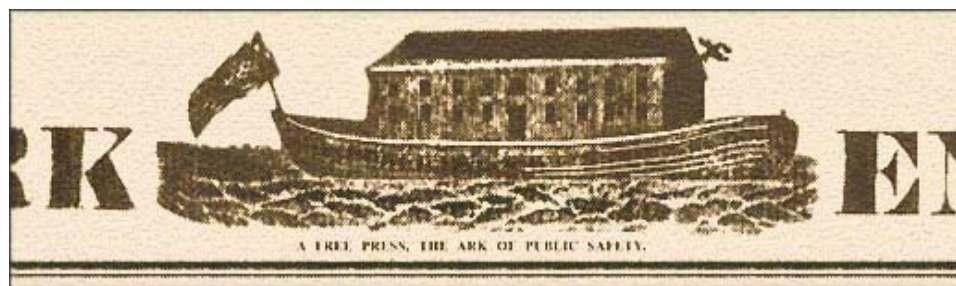
The Legislature opened the bidding in a [public auction](#) to dispose of the State's lands on Grand Island on June 3, 1825. One of Major Noah's business partners, Samuel Leggett, purchased 2,555 acres in Noah's behalf. According to contemporary [newspaper reports](#), twelve other parties also came away from the land auction with deeds to Grand Island lots in their pockets: Cornelius Masren, Herman H. Bogert, John G. Camp, Peter Smith, John Knowles, Alvin Stewart, Levi Beardsley, James O. Morse, S. R. Warren, C. R. Webster, Dudley & Gregory, and James Carmichael. Of these partners only Sheriff Camp of Buffalo was a resident in the far west of New York. He was perhaps one of those most directly involved in Noah's development scheme. The other men in the list were also

involved with Noah's plan to one degree or another.

A news report of the June auction made this announcement:

It is said Mr. Noah's object is to accommodate his brethren, the Jews, many of whom are wishing to emigrate to this country, and to locate in a body, in sufficient numbers to form a colony or city, by themselves. Grand Island has been selected for this purpose, and it is stated in the Albany Gazette, that the corner stone of a city will be laid on this island, with suitable masonic and religious ceremonies, in the course of the present summer, probably about the time when the canal is completed and in operation.

Major Noah's plan to make Grand Island into a "City of Refuge" was finally afloat in a sea of optimistic financing, and so was his own "rescue ark," a picture of which sailed the ocean of ink poured out in printing the masthead of his *New York Enquirer*. Noah's New York City paper continued to feature the Noah's Ark picture for months after the settlement plan became a condeded failure. During the October 1825 dedication celebration which opened the Erie Canal to commercial traffic, Moredcai M. Noah -- ever the theatrical showman -- also sponsored the sailing of a sizeable real ark filled with wild western animals, all the way from Buffalo to New York City.



Even after Ararat's failure, M. M. Noah kept Noah's Ark in his newspaper masthead.

In anticipation of his staging a gala dedication ceremony for the new land speculation scheme, Major Noah ordered the cornerstone for his enterprise from the distant quarries of Cleveland. Its inscription read:

"Ararat, A City of Refuge for Jews, Founded by Mordecai Noah in the month Tizri 5586, September 1825 and in the 50th Year of American Independence."

At the end of the summer of 1825 Major Noah and his private secretary journeyed to the region of his intended "happy land" of "Ararat," and there oversaw the pretentious dedication ceremony for the new refuge (jointly held in the Buffalo Masonic Lodge and at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in that town.

Noah's visionary plan, his grandiose personality, and his apparent thirst for personal theocratic power were not well accepted by prominent Jews of his day. The plan elicited interest and discussion, but without substantial support from the leaders of European Jewry a practical immigration program could never be initiated, much less carried to fruition. The Noah program was widely ridiculed in the European Jewish press and no Jews from that part of the world moved to Mordecai's "happy land.

The Failure of Noah's "Ararat"

The would-be "Judge" of a new nation saw his financial and political backing melt away in New York City, while his Masonic support in upstate New York faded amidst the anti-Masonic chaos of the William Morgan affair in 1826. The U. S. and Canadian Indian tribes showed no signs of joining Noah's "Israelite" undertaking, and the entire scheme quickly turned into a dismal failure. Probably the deciding factor against Major Noah's scheme was the disinterest and criticism expressed by Jewish leaders in Europe. Writing in protest against Noah's 1825 project, the [Grand Rabbi De Cologne in 1826](#) said, "inform Mr. Noah, that the venerable Messrs. Hiershell and Meldonna, chief rabbis at London, and myself, thank him, but positively refuse the appointments he has been pleased to confer upon us. We declare that, according to our degrees, God alone knows the epoch of the Israelitish restoration; and he alone will make it known to the whole universe, by signs entirely unequivocal; and that every attempt on our part, to re-assemble with any political-national design, is forbidden, as an act of high treason against the Divine Majesty."

Given the almost inevitable refusal of the European Jewish leaders to sign on to Major Noah's emigration plans, the question might well be asked, "Just how serious was Noah about bringing the whole project to a successful outcome?" Is it

possible that all of his lofty rhetoric and grandiose claims were merely a smoke-screen behind which Mordecai M. Noah was launching a great land speculation scheme -- a scheme designed primarily to enrich himself and his associates? This interpretation of his motives and methods was voiced in [the 1825 response](#) by the editor of *Niles Weekly Register* published in Baltimore: "It is very possible that this *speculation* may succeed, so far as to fill the pockets of Mr. Noah and his associates -- which, it is plainly evident, is the *corner stone* of the project just developed..." Writing a few years later, Mormon journalist [W. W. Phelps](#) was even less sympathetic in his assessment of Noah as being "a man [who] has failed to dupe his fellow Jews, with a New Jerusalem on Grant Island... to wheedle money from the Jews to fill his own pockets..."

Had M. M. Noah in 1825-26 exercised less headline-grabbing theatrics and more productive communication with the European Jewish leaders, the basics of his plan might well have been carried to success in Jacksonian America. But that alternative would have included Noah simply as the promoter of a probably non-theocratic Jewish colonization, almost certainly shorn of its Israelite Indians and his solicitations of annual monetary payments from overseas. The very self-serving ostentation and staged media hoopla Major Noah counted upon to give his gathering scheme some free world-wide publicity ended up dooming the project before it ever got off the ground.

The Masonic Connection

W. W. Phelps (the man who accused Major Noah of trying to dupe his fellow Jews), had gained his own pre-Mormon reputation in western New York as the crusading editor of the anti-Masonic *Ontario Phoenix* of Canandaiga. At least part of the vitrolPhelps directed at Major Noah as late as 1835 probably came from the fact that Noah was a leading Masonic promoter, while Phelps expressed himself as being bitterly against that fraternal society and "secret combinations" of all kinds. Phelps' rhetoric typified the feelings of many of the puritanically-inclined former Yankees who had settled western New York. The same "rise of the common man" which helped put Andrew Jackson into the Presidency in 1830 also helped spawn the distrust and antagonism western New Yorkers heaped upon [the Freemasons after 1826](#). It very likely that most (if not all) of Major Noah's twelve investment associates in the Grand Island scheme were also Freemasons. At the very least, that identification of their private affiliations would fit in quite nicely with the blatantly Masonic trappings of Noah's [Sep. 15, 1825 activities](#) at St. Paul's

Episcopal Church in Buffalo and the Masonic Lodge of that place.

The editor of *Niles Weekly Register*, in his [article of Oct. 1, 1825](#), called Major Noah's calendar dating of the Grand Island dedication ceremonies "a strange mixture of Christianity and Judaism." He might well have extended that estimation to the whole of the September 15, 1825 Jewish-Masonic-Christian rendezvous in Buffalo. It would have been practically impossible for Mordecai, the Jewish leader from New York City, to have gained his commanding access of St. Paul's church in Buffalo without the specific cooperation and recommendation of Episcopal leaders in both cities. In those days it would have been far more likely for wealthy American Episcopalians, Diests and Jews to have become important Freemasons than it would have been for Christian primitivists and Calvinists drawn from the "common people." It is altogether likely that many of Mordecai M. Noah's associates (as well as the expected city lots buyers) involved in his Grand Island development plan came from the former social set and not the latter.

The ruling, professional, and commercial elite class of New York State in the 1820s and 1830s was largely comprised of Episcopalians, Diests and Jews of Masonic affiliation who were not pious descendants of New England Puritans. Yet it was precisely the pioneering posterity of the latter group which made up most of the population of western New York. Whitney R. Cross, in his 1950 book *The Burned-Over District*, documents well the mentality and religious tendencies among this pioneer population. Cross's chapter 6 ("The Martyr") deals with the rise of anti-Masonic fervor in upstate NY in the late 1820s. In chapter 6, on page 115, he tells of the Burned-over District's New Englander pioneers' grass-roots reaction against the Masonic institution: "Increasingly it appeared that Masons held a monopoly of offices [in western NY] ... When local citizens' committees induced the state legislature to consider a special investigation, their resolutions met such smaking defeats that a gigantic [Masonic] conspiracy seemed the only logical explanation. If corruption in high places extended over the whole state, surely the people must act..."

Major Noah's imposing Masonic dedication ceremonies for the Grand Island project may have attracted the awe of western New Yorkers, but they also no doubt aroused their ire as well. Such pomp and ceremony may have been tolerable at such occasions as Dewitt Clinton's 1823 great conclave of Freemasons in New York City to extol the Erie Canal, but "out west" among the "common folk," it was less esteemed. In this regard, Major Noah's timing for his 1825 dedication could not have been worse. Most of the western New York Masonic lodges broke away

from their eastern "City Grand Lodge" counterparts in 1823, throwing "blue lodge" Freemasonry west of Syracuse into a turmoil. Months before M. M. Noah arrived at Buffalo to orchestrate his 1825 dedication extravaganza, many of the Masons in the west (under the leadership of Joseph Enos and S. Van Rensselaer of Canandaigua) had already grown suspicious and resentful of their eastern counterparts (who remained loyal to Grand Master Martin Hoffman of New York City). Then, as though to roguishly compound that intra-fraternal problem many times over, in late 1826 the whole "Burned-over District" was caught up in the anti-Masonic turmoil which followed the Masonic abduction and probable murder of William Morgan -- the man whom Whitney R. Cross called "The Martyr." It did not matter to the common man in the west that the "Morgan Affair" was primarily attributable to the break-away "Country Grand Lodge" Masons. The westerners were soon tarring all Masons with the same blackened brush -- and that would have included Mordecai M. Noah as well.

Western New York After the "Morgan Affair"

In August of 1831 James Gordon Bennett, an associate editor (along with Mordecai M. Noah, until Noah left early in 1833) at the NY *Morning Courier and Enquirer*, paid a visit to the Palmyra area of western NY, probably partly for the purposes of doing some investigative reporting on the Mormons in that place. His articles on this subject appeared in the *Courier* on [Aug. 31 & Sep. 1, 1831](#). In making his report Bennett editorialized as follows:

"About this time [late 1820s] a very considerable religious excitement came over New York in the shape of a revival. It was also about the same period, that a powerful and concerted effort was made by a class of religionists, to stop the mails on Sunday to give a sectarian character to Temperance and other societies... and to organize generally a religious party, that would act altogether in every public and private concern of life. The greatest efforts were making by the ambition, tact, skill and influence of certain of the clergy, and other lay persons, to regulate and control the public mind... to turn the tide of public sentiment entirely in favor of blending religious and worldly concerns together. Western New York has for years, had a most powerful and ambitious religious party of zealots, and their dupes.... The singular character of the people of western New York -- their originality, activity, and proneness to excitement furnished admirable materials for enthusiasts in religion or roguery to work upon.... This general impulse given to religious fanaticism by a set of men in Western New York, has been productive among other strange results of the infatuation of Mormonism."

Bennett's 1831 articles might be called "anti-religious" as well as "anti-Mormon," in the same way that his later printed attacks upon his old associate at the *Courier and Enquirer* could be called "anti-Semitic" as well as "anti-M. M. Noah." In his zeal to put down the reactionary popular piety of western New York in the early 1830s, Bennett avoided the then potentially self-embarrassing topic of anti-Freemasonry altogether. Had Bennett extended the scope of his 1831 articles only slightly, he might well have said that the anti-Masonic movement sprang from the same "class of religionists" who were so upset about Sunday mail deliveries and their neighbors' over-indulgence in ardent spirits. Indeed, historian Whitney R. Cross used the story of these same Burned-over District "religionists" to link his chapter dealing with the anti-Masonic William Morgan and his subsequent chapter concerning the early Mormonism of Joseph Smith, Jr. Bennett's designated "class of religionists" would have been little interested in promoting the seeming self-aggrandizing land sales schemes of big city politicians, Freemasons, and Jews like Mordecai M. Noah. It was, however, this same "class of religionists" who gave rise to a singular group of Christians who were ready to embrace practically every element of Noah's "Israelite Gathering," save that of Noah himself being the leader of a Jewish and American Indian "chosen people." As early as 1800, breakaway Congregationalists in [Middletown, Vermont](#) had begun to teach that ordinary Yankee farmers might well be Israelite descendants themselves! These modern "Israelites" were led by the cultist Nathaniel Wood, who taught that they were "under the special care of Providence; that the Almighty would... specially interpose in their behalf..." According to Wood and his followers, a New Englander's "Israelite" ancestry could be determined by the supernatural motions of a witch hazel diving rod pointed at his or her person.

Such odd Southcottian notions affirming alleged Israelite ancestry remained fixed within the minds of certain New York pioneers -- indeed, among some of those very same believers whom Bennett denounced as a fanatical "class of religionists." The primitive Anglo-Israelite sentiments of these "religionists" were no doubt originally based upon the prophecies of Richard Brothers, who in 1795 published a widely-circulated book promoting his improbable Israelite-European descent claims (*Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies...*, London, Albany, etc.). All things considered, it is not at all surprising that in the late 1820s the leaders of a certain sect of self-proclaimed modern "Israelites," native to the "Burned-over District," conspired secretly to hijack, Christianize, and implement Major Noah's failed "Israelite Gathering."

The Aftermath of the "Ararat" Failure

In the fall of 1833 Mordecai M. Noah finally sold his share of Grand Island acreage to L. F. Allen, Stephen Waite, and other timber-cutting investors under the auspices of "The East Boston Company." These investors of 1833 purchased a total of nearly 16,000 acres of land on the island from a various owners, at about five dollars per acre -- considerably below what Major Noah must have originally anticipated in a lucrative disposal of his Ararat "city lots." A newspaper article reprinted in the *Chardon Spectator* of Geauga Co., Ohio on Dec. 28, 1833 tells how these Bostonians planned to cut the island's white oak groves and to transport the timber to shipyards on the east coast via the Erie Canal. In describing the saw-mill village which had sprung up on the island, the article reported "This valuable property has lain dormant and almost forgotten, since the renowned Jewish city of Ararat was founded by Judge Noah, on the very site of which the present proprietors are erecting their establishment..."

As late as 1837 Noah was still supporting the idea that the American Indians were his fellow Israelites (for details see his *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel...* NYC, 1837,); but by then he had given up gathering these native tribes with his own Jewish race. Having abandoned this utopian amalgamation of diverse peoples, Major Noah embraced the more widely-held Zionist view that a direct colonization of Turkish Palestine was the only way to provide a permanent refuge for the Jews. By 1844 he was pleading in his *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews* for the Christian world to help the Jews resettle in their original Middle Eastern homeland.

If Mordecai M. Noah temporarily lost pious prestige and pecuniary profit in the aftermath of his Grand Island development scheme, he soon recovered and was able to reestablish his previous reputation as a man of literary distinction and political influence. Bits and pieces of his old Jewish emigration plan saw fruition, both in America and, eventually, in what is today the nation of Israel. The question which remains is whether or not even more "bits and pieces" of his "Israelite Gathering" project were collected and promoted by the early Latter Day Saints.

The Mormon Zion

In [March of 1831](#), less than a year following the founding of the Mormons' "Church of Christ" in upstate New York, David Staats Burnet, an Ohio newspaper

editor and an admirer of religious reformer Alexander Campbell, published this interesting remark:

"[the Mormons believe] that treasures of great amount were concealed near the surface of the earth, probably by the Indians, whom they were taught to consider the descendants of the ten lost Israelitish tribes, by the celebrated Jew who a few years since promised to gather Abraham's sons on Grand Island, thus to be made a Paradise."

The "celebrated Jew" spoken of here is, of course, Mordecai M. Noah. Burnet was almost certainly the first writer to publicly associate the Mormons' beliefs and practices with the celebrated Major Noah and his views concerning Indian origins. Rev. Burnet limited the tie he perceived between the two parties to a single item: the presumed "Israelitish" origins of the American Indians. Implicit in Burnet's statement is the fact that both Major Noah and the earliest Mormon leaders had expressed these similar Indian origin views at about the same time and place -- that is, western New York in the latter half of the 1820s. This Israelite claim for Indian origins was not unique to Major Noah and the Mormons, of course. It was a widely-held belief which had been previously promoted in the popular press by such religious writers as James Adair, Elias Boudinot, Josiah Priest, and the Rev. Ethan Smith of Poultney, Rutland Co., Vermont.

Mordecai Noah's plans for an Israelite gathering on Grand Island and his advocacy for the Israelite origin of the American Indians were well known throughout western New York after the fall of 1825. Reprints of his own and others' articles on this subject appeared in the newspapers published in and around Joseph Smith, Jr.'s home town of Palmyra, New York throughout the mid-1820s (see, for example, the bibliographic information provided in Marvin Hill's "The Roll of Christian Primitivism..." (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1968, p. 98.; Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (St. Louis: 1980) pp. 54-56 & 65-67; Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: 1986) pp. 42-43, 56; Steven Epperson, *Mormons and Jews...* (Salt Lake City: 1992) pp. 12-13; and H. Michael Marquardt & Wesley Walters, *Inventing Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: 1994) p. 45).

Joseph Smith, Jr. was not the only early Mormon leader who was living near Major Noah's hoped-for "City of Refuge" during the mid-1820s. [Oliver Cowdery](#), one of Joseph's primary associates in establishing Mormonism, was said to have been a pedestrian pamphlet peddler in western New York during this same time

period. He may well have been living in Niagara, Orleans, or Genesee counties, practicing the printing trade, while Mordecai M. Noah was first purchasing his "city lots" on nearby Grand Island.

Writers commenting on the parallel between Noah's views regarding Indian origins and the views held by the early Mormons have overlooked Oliver Cowdery's probable proximity to Major Noah's utopian project in western New York during the mid-1820s. On the other hand, Joseph Smith, Jr.'s nearness to these events and his evident interest in the subject are well documented. In his on-line essay [Challenging the Book of Mormon](#) Stephen F. Cannon states:

"...some of the foundational ideas of the Book of Mormon may have emanated from [Smith's reading of local newspapers]... A prime example of this is a reprint of an address given by one Mordecai M. Noah. Published in the *Wayne Sentinel* on October 11, 1825 (five years before the publication of the Book of Mormon), this address puts forth Noah's theory on the Hebrew origin of the American Indian, "Those who are conversant with the public and private economy of the Indians, are strongly of (the) opinion that they are the lineal descendants of the Israelites, and my own researches go far to confirm me in the same belief." Of course, the central theme of the BOM is that of tracing migrations of Israelites to ancient America, and one of the families becoming evil, being cursed with a dark skin, and degenerating into the progenitors of the American Indian."

A fact which the previous writers on this topic seem to have overlooked is that the early Mormons' social and religious programs resembled Major Noah's 1825 project in many, many other ways other than both parties simply subscribing to the alleged Israelite origins of the American Indians. The current writer has explored a few of these additional parallels in his on-line remarks regarding [Mordecai M. Noah and the Mormons](#). The essay posted there says that "The location of the "New Jerusalem" Israelite gathering place spoken of in the Book of Mormon (Ether ch. 6 -- 1830 ed.) was not clearly defined. The earliest Mormons thought of it as being situated 'on the borders by the Lamanites' in 'this land' (North America) and most likely within the western bounds of the United States."

A close inspection of the Mormon plan to initiate an Israelite "gathering" and a "restoration" among the American Indians in 1830-31 reveals literally scores of parallels with Major Noah's similar 1825 plan to restore the ancient society of the Jewish people in North America -- a project which, as Noah detailed it, was actually a plan to gather and restore the entire presumed nation of Israel (including the American Indians).

The primary difference between the Mormon project and Major Noah's prototype was that at a very early date the Mormon founders determined that the Jews and the major portion of the "Ten Lost Tribes" should be gathered and restored at Jerusalem. Only the descendants of the Israelite Patriarch Joseph and their associates would gather to a new "City of Refuge," which they would erect in the United States. By late 1830, President Jackson's removal of several of the southern Indian tribes to lands west of the Missouri River made the far-off "borders" of those dispossessed people a more promising spot for that new holy city than the largely bypassed Grand Island of M. M. Noah.

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