



*One of the Kinderhook Plates, a forgery used to try to embarrass Joseph Smith. (Courtesy of Church History Library, Salt Lake City.)*



Brian M. Hauglid

---

# DID JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATE THE KINDERHOOK PLATES?

*Critics argue that the Kinderhook Plates represent a case study of Joseph Smith's translation ability. They accept that the plates were a forgery, but they strongly contend that Joseph Smith tried to translate them. Critics maintain this position based on documentary evidence from the period. Latter-day Saint researchers have also concurred that the plates were a forgery but have argued against the idea that Joseph Smith actually translated any of them. So the question remains as to whether the Prophet actually tried to translate the Kinderhook Plates or not. That question is the subject of this investigation.*

ON April 23, 1843, nine men unearthed human bones and six small, bell-shaped plates in Kinderhook, Illinois, situated about seventy miles south of Nauvoo. Both sides of the plates apparently contained some sort of ancient writings. This discovery was reported in the *Quincy Whig* and then reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* (May 1, 1843, 185–87). The plates, later known as the Kinderhook Plates, made their way to Nauvoo and were presented to Joseph Smith, who was reported to have said, according to the *History of the Church*, “I have translated a portion of them, and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.”<sup>1</sup>

In later letters, two eyewitnesses to the event, W. P. Harris (1855) and Wilbur Fugate (1879), confessed that the whole thing was a hoax. With a group of other conspirators, they had manufactured the plates to give them the appearance of antiquity, buried them in a mound, and later pretended to excavate them, all for the purpose of trapping Joseph Smith into pretending to translate. However, it was not until 1980, when the only remaining plate was forensically examined, that the plates were conclusively determined to be, in fact, a nineteenth-century production.<sup>2</sup> Up to 1980 most Latter-day Saints rejected the confessions and believed the plates were authentic. Not only did skeptics accept the confessors' statements, but some continue to this day to argue that Joseph Smith pretended to translate a portion of the faked plates, claiming he could not have been a true prophet.

Since 1980 the question of authenticity has been answered and will not be dealt with here, except to say that Latter-day Saints (such as those who firmly believed the plates were authentic) are not immune to sometimes accepting information that is not correct. The central question now is whether Joseph Smith actually translated the plates. As one considers this question, it is important to keep a few things in mind: (1) Church history tells us that this is not the first time someone tried to lay a "translation trap" for Joseph Smith; (2) the remaining sources exhibit some ambiguity in regard to the possibility of Joseph Smith translating the plates; and (3) based on his previous pattern of dealing with revelation and scripture, either Joseph quickly lost interest when no revelation came or he did not view the Kinderhook Plates as sacred.

### *Kinderhook as an Echo of the Lost 116 Pages*

Most Latter-day Saints know that Joseph Smith gave Martin Harris 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript and that Harris subsequently lost them. Doctrine and Covenants 10 contains the Lord's counsel to Joseph concerning the lost 116 pages and has some relevance to the Kinderhook Plates situation: "Wicked men have

taken them from you” and “Satan hath put it into their hearts to alter the words which you have caused to be written, or which you have translated, which have gone out of your hands” (vv. 8, 10). According to the revelation, the “translation trap” involved Joseph’s enemies encouraging him to retranslate the lost pages (see v. 15) and then comparing the retranslation to the altered translation (see v. 17). Then it could be proclaimed “that he has lied in his words, and that he has no gift” (v. 18). Of course, Joseph never retranslated the missing pages, but he went through a difficult repentance process that included losing his ability to translate for a season. No doubt this left an enduring impression upon him concerning his sacred duty to guard revelation and scripture.

According to the confession of Wilbur Fugate, one of the nine original eyewitnesses, the idea of the Kinderhook Plates was to “prove the prophecy” that “‘Truth is yet to spring up out of the earth’ . . . by way of a joke.”<sup>3</sup> Fugate claims that he and two others hatched the plan and that most of the people present at the digging had no idea what was really going on. It is possible that Fugate’s phrase “by way of a joke” was initially aimed at members of the Church in general, but when Joseph showed interest in the plates, the forgers realized that the Prophet’s translation abilities could be put on the line. Put simply, in translating the Kinderhook Plates, Joseph Smith would show himself to be a bogus prophet who produced a bogus translation from bogus plates.

Echoes of Joseph’s experience with the lost 116 pages occur in this deliberate attempt to present Joseph Smith with something that had been altered or fabricated so that his ability to translate could be questioned. In either case, anything Joseph produced would cast a negative light on his translation abilities. Because the Lord warned Joseph of the altered 116 pages, he never retranslated them and nothing more was made of it from his critics. But this is not so with the Kinderhook Plates; some evidence suggests that Joseph translated at least a portion of the plates. Yet, like the missing 116 pages, no

evidence exists of Joseph Smith's Kinderhook critics holding a victory party or celebrating the success of the so-called joke. The long delay in revealing the conspiracy suggests that Joseph disappointed the conspirators by not stepping into their trap.

### *Joseph Smith and the Kinderhook Plates*

Although the *Times and Seasons* issue that contained the Kinderhook article was dated May 1, 1843, it reprinted the article from the *Quincy Whig* dated May 3, 1843. This means that either the *Times and Seasons* issue was predated or the *Quincy Whig* was postdated. The official announcement of the discovery in the *Times and Seasons* states that "Mr. Smith has had those plates, what his opinion concerning them is, we have not yet ascertained. The gentleman that owns them has taken them away. . . . We are informed however, he purposes returning with them for translation."<sup>4</sup> Joseph Smith likely had the plates for about five days between April 29 and May 3, 1843,<sup>5</sup> and again around June 24 of the same year.<sup>6</sup> However, only three sources from that time period deal with the translation question to any degree. The first is the statement from *History of the Church* cited at the beginning of this essay. Second is a letter Parley P. Pratt and Orson Pratt wrote to John Van Cott. The third is a letter from Charlotte Haven. As will be seen, these sources are ambiguous about whether Joseph Smith actually translated any of the Kinderhook Plates.

William Clayton wrote the entry for *History of the Church* dated May 1, 1843. In my view, it is the strongest evidence for Joseph translating a portion of the plates. In an important *Ensign* article, Stanley B. Kimball brought out two main concerns about Clayton's entry. He found that the entry was added in 1909 and is based on Clayton's May 1843 journal entry that was published in the *Millennial Star* in 1859. His original journal entry reads, "I have seen 6 brass plates which were found in Adams County. . . . President Joseph has translated a portion and says they contain the history of

the person with whom they were found and he was a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the ruler of heaven and earth.”<sup>7</sup> In 1909, when this journal entry was included in the *History of the Church*, the first part was changed to read “I have translated a portion of them,” implying that Joseph Smith was the author of the statement instead of William Clayton. Kimball said that this change was unfortunate but also pointed out that it was not an uncommon practice in the nineteenth century to write narrative in the first person when producing a biographical work.<sup>8</sup>

Kimball also expressed concern that Clayton’s journal entry may be based on speculation circulating at the time; he concluded that “as much misinformation and hearsay was current among people as there was fact.” He finds compelling support for this viewpoint in discrepancies between Clayton’s entry and Parley P. Pratt’s letter, such as Clayton’s claim that the discovery was made in Adams County, while Pratt says (correctly) that it was in Pike County (Pratt does not contradict Clayton’s translation statement).<sup>9</sup> This could lead one to suspect that Clayton’s statement about Joseph Smith translating some of the plates is based on hearsay.

While Kimball may be correct in questioning the reliability of Clayton’s journal entry, some argue that William Clayton is about as reliable a source for information about Joseph Smith as one could find in that day. In his introduction to *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, George G. Smith quotes Clayton’s family members in describing him as methodical,<sup>10</sup> “the soul of punctuality,”<sup>11</sup> one who had a “love for order, which he believed [was] the first law of heaven . . . he would not carry a watch that was not accurate.”<sup>12</sup> It is reasonable to suppose that Joseph Smith hired Clayton specifically because of his detailed nature, which would be beneficial in accurately recording all that the Prophet would say or do. From Clayton’s journals we learn that between early 1842 and the time of Joseph Smith’s death in 1844, Clayton was in the Prophet’s company on almost a

daily basis.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is quite possible that Clayton was with the Prophet when he examined the Kinderhook Plates.

Even though Clayton got the location of the discovery wrong, it is quite another thing to say that he incorrectly recorded a statement concerning translation that he may have heard from the Prophet himself. If Clayton is right and Joseph did indeed translate some of the plates, then the next question is why Joseph did not finish the translation. This question will be addressed shortly.

In a letter dated May 7, 1843, to John Van Cott, Parley P. Pratt wrote:

I have no further news except that six plates having the appearance of Brass have lately been dug out of a mound by a gentleman in Pike Co. Illinois, they are small and filled with engravings in Egyptian language and contain the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham the son of Noah his bones were found in the same vase (made of Cement) part of the bones had crumbled to dust & the other part were ~~part~~ preserved the bones were 15 ft. under ground. The gentlemen who found them were unconnected with this church but have brought them to Joseph Smith for examination & translation a large number of Citizens here have seen them and compared the characters with those on the Egyptian papyrus which is now in this city. I have no time for particulars but you will hear more soon on this subject.<sup>14</sup>

Again, Kimball emphasizes the contradictions between Clayton's and Pratt's accounts in order to underscore the fact that both contain hearsay and thus may not be trustworthy.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Pratt said the plates were "in [the] Egyptian language and contain the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham the son of Noah," while Clayton said they "contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the



loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.” Although it is difficult to determine if Clayton and Pratt would have viewed this as a contradiction, more recent research suggests possible connections between the Jaredites and the Egyptians.<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, Pratt does not specifically state that Joseph had translated the plates but only that “the gentlemen who found them . . . brought them to Joseph Smith for examination and translation.” What does imply that Joseph did some translation is the close approximation to Clayton’s entry that described the plates as being a history of a descendant of Ham. But where Pratt learned this is difficult to determine. He does not say he heard this from Joseph Smith himself, as Clayton does.

On the one hand, Pratt’s letter reinforces the excitement of the find and the possible interest it would have to Joseph Smith, but on the other hand, it falls short of giving any certainty on whether Joseph actually translated any of the plates. In fact, Pratt mentions a fact not found in the other accounts—that “a large number of Citizens here have seen them and compared the characters with those on the Egyptian papyrus.”<sup>17</sup> One can only wonder who these citizens were, what they learned from their comparison, and what kind of speculation and hearsay this engendered. An answer to these questions could perhaps shed more light on where some of the information about the Kinderhook Plates came from.

Finally, Charlotte Haven, a non-Mormon who visited her Latter-day Saint sister in Nauvoo as a young girl, wrote in a letter that a Joshua Moore “brought with him half a dozen thin pieces of brass, apparently very old, in the form of a bell about five or six inches long. They had on them scratches that looked like writing, and strange figures like symbolic characters. They were recently found, he said, in a mound a few miles below Quincy. When he showed them to Joseph, the latter said that the figures or writing on them was similar to that in which the Book of Mormon was written, and if Mr. Moore could leave them, he thought that by the help of revelation he would be able to translate them.”<sup>18</sup>



Although Charlotte Haven is known to have been somewhat antagonistic toward the Church, what she suggests here is not outside the realm of possibility. For Joseph to say that the Kinderhook characters resembled Book of Mormon characters he had seen fourteen years earlier is not unreasonable or difficult to believe. Nor is it improbable that Joseph referred to revelation as an aid to translation because he had already received much translation revelation that produced scripture. What is clear from this account is that Joseph Smith had not yet translated any of the plates but had only made preliminary observations. But Charlotte brings up an important observation—that Joseph would translate the plates with “the help of revelation.” This allows for the possibility that Joseph’s initial interest in the plates may have ended when no revelation came forth.

### *Joseph Smith and Scripture*

So if Joseph did translate a portion of the plates, why did he not continue? The key here is to explore whether Joseph viewed this translation endeavor as a revelatory effort to bring forth more sacred scripture. We know how he treated scriptural translations. After the initial translation or revelation of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham, and the Doctrine and Covenants, the texts all went through three important phases: transcription, publication, and distribution. If Joseph judged the Kinderhook Plates as being equivalent, he would have steered the text through the same process. However, no transcription or publication of the Kinderhook translation exists. All that is available is a paraphrase of what Joseph Smith said the plates contained—a history of a descendant of Ham. This does not qualify as a transcription of a translation. In the official *History of the Church*, there is no mention of a scribe being hired to record the translation, and no translation session is noted.

Likewise, nothing is mentioned in official sources concerning plans to publish and distribute the translation. All three of these phases are amply attested to in Joseph’s work with previous scripture

but are conspicuously absent in the Kinderhook incident. Perhaps Joseph inspected the plates and tried to translate them but received no revelation, and, recognizing the stupor of thought, lost interest and moved on to other things.

### *Kinderhook as an Educational Pursuit*

Another possibility is that if the Kinderhook Plates do not fit into Joseph Smith's sacred pursuit, perhaps they fall more comfortably into a scholarly realm. Joseph participated in a number of educational pursuits such as studying Hebrew, Egyptian, and other languages. As early as December 1832, the Lord commanded Joseph to "be instructed more perfectly" concerning a variety of areas, such as astronomy, geology, history, languages, and political science (see D&C 88:78–79). Throughout his life the Prophet pursued many kinds of knowledge. He was particularly interested in ancient languages and may have encouraged experiments in learning Egyptian while he translated the Book of Abraham. It is possible that he saw the Kinderhook Plates as an occasion for attempting (if futilely) a scholarly study of an ancient language rather than an inspired translation of ancient characters. Rather than carrying the experiment forward, however, he may have abandoned it almost immediately and made no attempt to establish the translation as scripture.<sup>19</sup>

### *Conclusion*

An examination of the available sources shows a lively interest in the Kinderhook discovery on the part of Church members and of Joseph Smith himself. Eyewitnesses later confessed the whole affair was a hoax, though they made nothing of it during Joseph's life. The fact that Joseph did not treat the Kinderhook Plates as a sacred project suggests that he may have had only a scholarly interest in the plates. Or perhaps Joseph sincerely believed that the Lord had led him to another sacred record that could be translated to provide the Saints with additional scripture, but when no inspiration came

he quickly abandoned the Kinderhook Plates. It may also be that both Joseph the scholar and Joseph the prophet tried to do something with the plates, but nothing really came of either approach. Although William Clayton gives fairly strong evidence that Joseph attempted to translate at least some of the plates, apparently Joseph did not go far enough for the conspirators to spring the trap.

### *Notes*

1. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:372.
2. See Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax," *Ensign*, August 1981, 66–74.
3. Wilbur Fugate to James T. Cobb, June 30, 1879, quoted in Wilhelm Wyl (Wymental), *Mormon Portraits* (Salt Lake City, 1888), 207.
4. "Ancient Records," *Times and Seasons*, May 1, 1843.
5. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 71.
6. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 72.
7. *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 100.
8. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 67–68.
9. For instance, "Pratt heard of a discovery in Pike County; Clayton said Adams County. Clayton said that the find was made six feet underground; Pratt, fifteen. Elder Pratt spoke of a cement vase—an item mentioned in no other account. Clayton mentioned a skeleton nine feet tall—also unmentioned in any other account. Clayton said that the plates gave a history of an Egyptian; Pratt mentioned a Jaredite." Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 73.
10. *Intimate Chronicle*, liii.
11. *Intimate Chronicle*, xvi.
12. *Intimate Chronicle*, xvi.
13. *Intimate Chronicle*, xxii–xxiii.
14. Parley P. Pratt and Orson Pratt to John Van Cott, May 7, 1843, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. See the documentary edition of this letter: Brian M. Hauglid, "'Come & Help Build the Temple & City': Parley P. and Orson Pratt's May 1843 Letter to John Van Cott," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2011).
15. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates," 73.
16. Thanks to Mark Ashurst-McGee and many others for help on this point. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph Smith, the Kinderhook Plates, and the Question of Revelation" (unpublished, 1996), 8, which cites Nibley as arguing for a striking relationship between the Jaredites and the Egyptians.

17. In an article appearing in the *New York Herald*, May 30, 1843, the author (who identified himself simply as “Gentile”) indicates that the Kinderhook Plates were compared with the “Egyptian Alphabet,” probably referring to the document known as the “Grammar and Aphabet [*sic*] of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL), compiled and written by W. W. Phelps and Warren Parrish in Kirtland in 1835. In a presentation titled “Joseph Smith’s Translation from the Kinderhook plates: A Historical Mystery,” given at the Thirteenth Annual Mormon Apologetics Conference of FAIR (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research) on August 5, 2011, Don Bradley presented evidence that a character on the Kinderhook Plates resembles one found on page 4 of the GAEL. The description of the character also corresponds closely to Clayton’s description. Bradley argues that the use of the GAEL indicates that Joseph Smith took a secular interest in the plates rather than a revelatory one.
18. Charlotte Haven, “A Girl’s Letters from Nauvoo,” *Overland Monthly*, December 1890, 630. The letter is dated May 2, 1843.
19. See Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph Smith, the Kinderhook Plates, and the Question of Revelation,” 18–25.