

CHAPTER 4

THE MANUSCRIPT THEFT

Despite having been missing for nearly two centuries, investigations into the disappearance of the Book of Mormon's lost manuscript have scarcely been done at all. Instead, Martin Harris's antagonistic wife Lucy Harris has been generally assumed to be the only suspect worth considering, and the case was closed before it was ever opened. This chapter will open the case of the Book of Mormon manuscript theft, exploring in detail how the manuscript came to be stolen and examining the evidence for the identity of the thieves.

The story of the manuscript's loss begins where we left off in the story of its translation. Joseph Smith and Martin Harris carried out their respective roles in the translation process for several weeks, but practical considerations entailed that sooner or later they must pause. Emma was about to deliver the couple's first child, and Martin was feeling pressure to return home after having parted with his children and wife and forsaken his farm for most of the spring. It also appears that Joseph and Martin were running out of paper.¹

In anticipation of a break in the work, Martin requested that he be permitted to take the translation manuscript home with him to show others.² He likely also requested to again take the plate facsimile that he had shown to Anthon. Such permission would enable him to display both the characters, which "the learned" could not read, and the translation, which Joseph *had* read from the plates.³ That Martin took the Anthon transcript and lost it with the translation manuscript is suggested by two considerations: no one describes seeing that transcript after 1828, and none of the still-existing transcripts match the one described by Anthon.⁴

In response to Martin's request to take the documents, Joseph petitioned God for permission but was denied through the interpreters. At Martin's urging, Joseph asked again, resulting again with the same answer. After further

1. Joseph Knight Sr., "Manuscript of the History of Joseph Smith," in Vogel, *EMD*, 4:19. Joseph Knight recalled giving Joseph "a little money to Buoy paper" in January 1829. Since, as discussed below, little if any translation work was done during the remainder of 1828 after the manuscript loss, this suggests that Joseph was already low on paper for translation when the work halted in June 1828. The paper used for the translation is further discussed in the following chapter.

2. Joseph Smith, "History, circa Summer 1832."

3. John A. Clark, *Gleanings by the Way*, 222–28.

4. Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, February 17, 1834, in Vogel, *EMD*, 4:377–81. Charles Anthon to Thomas Winthrop Coit, April 3, 1841, in Vogel, *EMD*, 4:382–86.

teasing from Martin, and as the translation neared a pause, Joseph agreed to make a third inquiry, upon which permission was finally granted for Martin to show others the manuscript, along with a commandment that it be limited to only five designated family members: “his brother Preserved Harris, his own wife, his father, and his also mother, and a Mrs Cobb a sister to his wife.”⁵ Before taking the manuscript, Martin had to covenant to obey “the word of the Lord” that restricted the manuscript’s audience to those five.⁶

Martin’s repeated requests were, in part, responsible for the manuscript loss. Had he settled for the first or second answer, the curious reader would not be holding the present book in his or her hands but would instead be reading a version of the Book of Mormon that contains many of the missing stories this volume intends to reconstruct. Given the risks and severity of the consequences of Martin’s actions, a question crucial to understanding the loss of that book is: Why was Martin Harris so insistent on taking the manuscript home with him after already having been told no by God twice?

Trouble in the Harris Home

An obvious reason for Martin Harris to take the manuscript back with him was to satisfy skepticism at home. Martin’s wife had been doubtful of, and even antagonistic toward, Joseph Smith’s claims. Additionally, Martin’s time away from his home and farm raised skepticism about *him*. From the family’s perspective, Martin Harris was a man gone mad.⁷ Martin’s various travels in the winter of 1828 to authenticate the character transcript (between Palmyra, Harmony, Albany, Philadelphia, and New York City) and his subsequent journeys that spring to act as Joseph’s scribe would likely have taken about eight weeks in just travel time alone.⁸ On top of these, Martin spent some eight weeks of the spring actually scribing for Joseph.⁹ Martin thus sacrificed much of his winter and nearly his entire spring to assist with the translation, and the particular time period Martin chose to leave the farm to serve as a translation scribe was startling. The winter of 1827–28, which has been called “a season

5. Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints*, 1:21.

6. Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832.”

7. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism*, 54.

8. Elden Watson estimates that Martin spent forty days traveling with the character transcript. This was followed by a journey to and from Harmony with his wife Lucy, which was then followed with his trip to begin scribing for Joseph and his return trip after scribing, each of these two round trips adding about eight days, bringing the estimated total to fifty-six days—eight weeks. Elden Watson, “Approximate Book of Mormon Translation Timeline.”

9. Stanley Kimball, “The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems,” 327.

of extraordinary climatic anomalies,” was so unseasonably warm as to bring an early planting season in the eastern United States, moving planting in upstate New York forward to mid-April. The time that Martin was assisting Joseph would have rivaled harvest as the busiest time of the year for a farmer in that region.¹⁰ During the time of his absence from the farm Martin, who had a reputation as an expert farmer, should have been carrying out or at least overseeing the work of harrowing, plowing, planting, and otherwise preparing his ground to ensure the fall yield of the flax, beans, pumpkins, corn, and other grains on which his livelihood depended.¹¹ Instead, Martin spent that exact period—from about April 12 through June 14—scribing the translation.

Planting season, however, was not all Martin missed at home. While in Harmony with Joseph, Martin was absent from something even more momentous: the May 8 wedding of his daughter Lucy Jr. to Flanders Dyke in Palmyra.¹²

Evidence that Martin’s absence from these family events was causing trouble at home is visible in what Martin’s wife was doing in his absence. On May 13, five days after Martin failed to show up to give his daughter’s hand to Flanders Dyke, a deed *from* Martin for eighty acres of his land appears in the Palmyra land records. The deed is made out to Martin’s cousin and brother-in-law, Peter Harris (Lucy’s brother; Martin and Lucy were biological first cousins). With this deed appears another, from Peter Harris to *Lucy* for the same eighty acres of what had been Martin’s land. This succession of deeds from Martin to Peter then from Peter to Lucy provided an indirect way for Martin to convey her dowry land to Lucy, circumventing laws about joint marital property. But how could Martin deed his land, even indirectly, to Lucy in his absence? The deeds in question were originally executed on November 29, 1825.¹³ After their original signing, Lucy held onto these deeds for nearly three years before she felt the need to record them. Her

10. Cary J. Mock et al, “The Winter of 1827–1828 over Eastern North America: A Season of Extraordinary Climatic Anomalies, Societal Impacts, and False Spring,” 87–115. My thanks to Geoff Slinker for bringing this paper to my attention.

11. The month of May, which Martin Harris spent entirely at scribing for Joseph, was not only a crucial time for planting but also an optimal time for haying. Information about farming in Palmyra area was provided by Donald Enders and Emily Utt, both of the LDS Historic Sites Division. Personal communication from Emily Utt, July 20, 2011.

12. Their marriage was announced in the May 9, 1828, *Wayne Sentinel*.

13. Indenture, Martin Harris to Peter Harris, Wayne County, New York, November 29, 1825; and Indenture, Peter Harris to Lucy Harris, Wayne County, New York, November 29, 1825. New York Land Records, Wayne County, Deeds 1827–1828, Vol. 5, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. I am grateful to Michael H. MacKay for first putting me on to this source, and to Marie Thatcher for tracking it down.

sudden recording of these deeds to give them full legal efficacy immediately after Martin missed their daughter's wedding communicates her intentions as clearly as any words could have. Upon her husband's failure to show up for the wedding, Lucy acted to give herself financial independence from Martin. She was taking an initial step toward separation.

When Martin *did* return home a full month after his wife took this step, he was walking into a firestorm—and he knew it. In view of his absence from both his agricultural seed and his generational seed, and the consequent estrangement between him and his wife, Martin's insistence to Joseph that he *had* to take the manuscript home becomes understandable. Martin told his son from his second marriage, Martin Jr., "many times" that "he obtained the manuscript to show to his wife in order to convince her of the truth of the B[ook] of M[ormon], as she was very bitter against the work."¹⁴ When we realize the magnitude of Martin's absences from the family, the reason for his wife's bitterness becomes clear.

After making such tremendous sacrifices at his family's expense, Martin needed some way of demonstrating to the family that he had not lost his mind but had stayed away from farm and family, and even his daughter's wedding, for a good cause—for a book that would do good in the world and would sell sufficiently for the family to recoup their growing investment in it. To have any hope of reconciliation with his wife, he needed something to show for his absence.

The Crime

Likely using Martin or Joseph as a source, Lucy Mack Smith provides us with some details of what transpired when Martin went home with the manuscript. On his arrival in Palmyra, Martin "was not slow" in acting on his hard-won permission to show the manuscript to the five designated family members.¹⁵ But because the purpose of bringing the document home was to palliate his family by showing them the impressive contents of the book, he more than likely stretched the permission to include other family members aside from the five, including the daughter and new son-in-law whose nuptials he had missed for the book's sake.

Lucy Harris was apparently pleased with what she saw and heard of the manuscript, and she gave him permission to lock it in her bureau, which was

14. Reported in William Wallace White, *Journal*, May 15, 1904. My thanks to Nathan Hadfield for making me aware of this source, and to Corey L. Evans for sharing it with me.

15. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, 420.

presumably the most secure location in their house. However, shortly after Martin arrived back in Palmyra with the manuscript, “a very particular friend” called on him while Lucy was out, and Martin did not know where the bureau key was. The friend’s curiosity “was much excited” and he “earnestly desired to see” the manuscript. Martin, for his part, was eager to please the friend by displaying the fruit of his scribal labors. Not wanting to wait for Lucy to return, Martin broke into his wife’s bureau by picking the lock, and in the process he both “injured his lady’s beureau [*sic*] considerably” and violated the covenant he had made with God. On his wife’s return and discovery of the damage to her bureau, “an intolerable storm ensued.” Martin took possession of the manuscript again, storing it in “his own set of drawers where he had it at his command” and showing it to “any good friend who happened [to] call on him.”¹⁶ According to Martin’s later recitation about the manuscript pages, during this time “he read them in the evenings to his family and some friends,” afterward always being sure “put them in his bureau in the parlor, locking both bureau and parlor, [and] putting the keys of each in his pocket.”¹⁷

After following this routine one night and then leaving for a few days’ trip, Martin never saw the manuscript again. When he went to retrieve the manuscript upon his return, it was gone. He cross-examined his wife and frantically tore open beds and pillows, but all to no avail. If Lucy Harris knew anything, she would not admit to it even under duress.¹⁸

Before this loss, another, of a much more personal nature, occurred for Joseph and Emma in Harmony. Shortly after Martin’s departure, their first child was born—and died. Joseph nursed his weak and grief-stricken wife through the weeks that followed, but as time wore on without word from Martin, another burden weighed on Joseph’s mind. Emma, knowing her husband’s worry over the book, urged him to leave her in her mother’s care and go to Palmyra to learn what detained Martin.¹⁹

Joseph’s 1839 history implies that he had good reason to worry at this time that letting Martin take the manuscript had led to disaster. Joseph recounted that after Martin left with the manuscript the angel came and rebuked Joseph for asking permission again to let Martin take the manuscript after being twice refused. In consequence of this impertinence, Moroni took from him the sacred relics and suspended his gift of seeing.²⁰

16. Anderson, 421.

17. William W. Blair, footnote comment in Lucy [Mack] Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations*, 131.

18. Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 418, 422.

19. Anderson, 412.

20. Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:21–22.

During Joseph's journey of a few days by stagecoach from Pennsylvania to the Palmyra-Manchester area he was so distressed over the loss of his child, his wife's poor health, and the feared loss of the manuscript that he scarcely slept. When he neared Manchester, a kindly fellow passenger who feared Joseph would fall asleep in the forest along the way and come to disaster insisted on helping him home. Over the final miles, the stranger led him by the arm, since Joseph "would fall asleep as he was walking along, every few minutes," according to his mother's account.²¹

Shortly after daybreak when Joseph had rested a bit, he sent for Martin Harris. The Smiths expected Martin to join them at eight o'clock for breakfast. He arrived four and a half hours later, "his hat drawn over his eyes." Lucy Mack Smith's dramatic account of what occurred during his visit cannot be improved on:

At length he entered the house. Soon after which we sat down to the table, Mr. Harris with the rest. He took up his knife and fork as if he were going to use them, but immediately dropped them. Hyrum, observing this, said "Martin, why do you not eat; are you sick?["] Upon which, Mr. Harris pressed his hands upon his temples, and cried out, in a tone of deep anguish, "Oh, I have lost my soul! I have lost my soul!"

Joseph, who had not expressed his fears till now, sprang from the table, exclaiming, "Martin, have you lost that manuscript? have you broken your oath, and brought down condemnation upon my head, as well as your own?"

"Yes, it is gone," replied Martin, "and I know not where."

"Oh, my God!" said Joseph, clinching his hands. "All is lost! all is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned--it is I who tempted the wrath of God. I should have been satisfied with the first answer which I received from the Lord; for he told me that it was not safe to let the writing go out of my possession." He wept and groaned, and walked the floor continually.

At length he told Martin to go back and search again.

"No," said Martin, "it is all in vain; for I have ripped open beds and pillows; and I know it is not there."

"Then must I," said Joseph, "return to my wife with such a tale as this? I dare not do it, lest I should kill her at once. And how shall I appear before the Lord? Of what rebuke am I not worthy from the angel of the Most High?"²²

Joseph did have to return to his wife with report of the manuscript's disappearance, but he was unable to tell her who had taken it. Any evidence of who the thief or thieves might be was lacking, and while Martin suspected his wife, Lucy Harris denied participating in or knowing anything about the theft.²³

21. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 414-16.

22. Anderson, 418-19.

23. Anderson, 422.

Joseph's initial revelation responding to the manuscript's disappearance (D&C 3) given in the weeks following said nothing of the thieves. However, a later revelation (D&C 10:1–37) recorded in May 1829 identified the theft as the work of a conspiracy of “wicked men” who had altered the words Joseph translated.²⁴ Readers of the revelation appear to have typically imagined the conspirators physically doctoring the original manuscript, taking up lying pens to add invasive text beside or over top of that recorded by Joseph's scribe. On this reading, the revelation describes a rather clumsy effort to discredit the Book of Mormon: the conspirators would try to palm off as the unmodified translation manuscript a document on which obvious interpolations had been made, with counterfeit words written over and crammed into the narrow spaces between the authentic words.

But Joseph's revelation does not describe the conspirators against the Book of Mormon making these sorts of interpolations on the manuscript they had taken. Rather, it says they had altered the manuscript's “words.” The *words* of the translation could be altered in two ways, either by tampering with the original pages or by copying some of them onto fresh pages, imitating the scribe's handwriting but introducing variant wording into the new copy. Whatever the challenges of convincingly mimicking the handwriting of Martin Harris or other scribes, it would have been less daunting than trying to pass off insertions and overwriting as the original text on the translation manuscript. The more intelligible strategy of (mis)copying the manuscript is a better candidate for what the revelation calls the conspirators' “cunning plan” (v. 23).

The revelation attributes to those who conspired to steal the manuscript several ignoble motives: They had acted in “anger” (v. 24) “to destroy” Joseph (v. 6), to get “the glory of the world” (v. 19), and to avoid “shame” they feared the book's publication would cause them (v. 19). These men, the revelation said, had been misled by Satan, who whispered to them the accusation against Joseph— “[H]e hath deceived you” (v. 29). So they set a trap for Joseph: when he retranslated and published the Book of Mormon they would identify and publish discrepancies between it and their altered text to show that he had “contradicted” himself in his two pretended translations (v. 31). In this way, Satan would “stir up” (v. 32) people to anger against Joseph so they would not believe God's words, and “thus Satan thinketh to overpower your [Joseph's] testimony in this generation, that the work might not come forth in this generation” (v. 33). This revelation about the stolen manuscript was published in part in the Preface to the 1830 Book of Mormon to explain to readers why

24. My analysis of the timing of Doctrine and Covenants 10 has been assisted by a 2011 internship with the Joseph Smith Papers Project, where discussions with Michael MacKay and Robin Jensen helped clarify my thoughts.

Nephi's "small plates" had been substituted for the missing first portion of Mormon's abridgment.²⁵

The Suspects

Lucy Harris has long been the chief, if not the *only*, identified suspect in the theft of the initial Book of Mormon manuscript. Her role in the theft, however, has been assumed more than argued and has been favored to the exclusion of other possibilities. While Lucy may or may not have been involved with the theft, she is just one of multiple potential suspects who also had access to Martin and motives to abscond with the manuscript.

Lucy Harris

Lucy Harris was a strong-willed woman that Lucy Mack Smith described as having an "irascible temper."²⁶ Lorenzo Saunders, who claimed to know Lucy Harris but did not seem to share Lucy Smith's dislike of her, similarly described her as "pretty high on combativeness."²⁷ This temper and combativeness of Lucy Harris is known to have taken other dramatic measures to separate her husband from the Book of Mormon project. About three months before the June 1828 manuscript theft, she reportedly colluded with an accomplice to discredit the Book of Mormon by stealing the Anthon

25. In addition to replacing the lost manuscript with another text, Joseph took another step that appears to have been aimed at foiling the conspirators described in Doctrine and Covenants 10. Early in June 1829, when Joseph had finished translating Mormon's abridgment, he dispatched one of those assisting him to go to Utica to secure a copyright for the book. There are four oddities in how this was done. First, acquiring a copyright for a book was not usually considered necessary at the time and not usually done. Second, the book was not yet complete. Third, Joseph's assistant, presumably at his behest, insisted that not just the book's title as required by law, but its entire title page, be transcribed into the copyright application. Fourth, the copyright, thus acquired, technically did not cover Nephi's small plates! The title page transcribed into the copyright record explicitly identified Mormon's record as the work to be copyrighted—making no mention of Nephi's text—and the small plates text mostly had not been translated. What the copyright specifically protected was the translation of Mormon's abridgment. Since the lost manuscript was, Joseph tells us, part of Mormon's abridgment, the lost manuscript would have been protected by the copyright Joseph obtained. It thus appears that Joseph's decision to pursue a copyright for the Book of Mormon text was aimed at stopping the conspirators from publishing the stolen manuscript. For copyright law at the time see Nathaniel Hinckley Wadsworth, "Copyright Laws and the 1830 Book of Mormon," 77–96.

26. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 421.

27. Lorenzo Saunders, interviewed by E. L. Kelley, in Vogel, *EMD*, 2:149.