

Kinderhook Plates

In 1843, a group of men unearthed six bell-shaped brass plates about three inches in height from an American Indian burial mound near Kinderhook, Illinois. The plates contained symbols resembling an ancient script, and one member of the group thought the artifacts appeared well suited for Joseph Smith to translate. Accounts suggest the discovery intrigued Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saints in Illinois, but no translated text resulted from this short-lived excitement.

One of those present when the plates were unearthed later reported that he had learned the whole episode was a prank. Wilbur Fugate admitted that he, Robert Wiley, and a local blacksmith forged the plates and deposited them in the burial mound the night before the discovery. Chemical and metallurgical analysis of the one surviving plate confirms the artifact was not an ancient production. Moreover, the characters on the plates do not match any known language and were likely invented by Fugate and Wiley.¹

Contemporaneous sources say very little about Joseph Smith's encounter with the Kinderhook plates, which occurred over a span of just a few days in 1843. Joseph apparently examined the plates and, according to his clerk William Clayton, remarked that they contained "the history of ... a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh king of Egypt."² Joseph evidently did not attempt a revelatory translation as he had done with the Book of Mormon plates, but rather appears to have compared the symbols on the Kinderhook plates with other ancient artifacts in his possession. One symbol on the plates closely matches a glyph on the Egyptian papyri Joseph translated in Kirtland, Ohio. Joseph's previous translation of this glyph mentions a descendant of Ham through the lineage of the pharaohs.³

Whether Joseph suspected the forgery, thought of attempting a revelatory translation but experienced a "stupor of thought,"⁴ or merely took a scholarly interest in the purported ancient writings (like other amateur linguists of the time) remains unconfirmed by historical accounts. Whatever he thought of the plates, he quickly lost interest in them.

Church Resources

Joseph Smith, "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," 195, note 397, josephsmithpapers.org.

Stanley B. Kimball, "Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to Be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax," *Ensign*, Aug. 1981, 66–74.

Bibliography

The following publication provides further information about this topic. By referring or linking you to this resource, we do not endorse or guarantee the content or the views of the authors.

Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph Smith and the Kinderhook Plates," in Laura Harris Hales, ed., *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 93–115.

Notes

1. Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph Smith and the Kinderhook Plates," in Laura Harris Hales, ed., *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 93–97.
2. Joseph Smith, "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 2, 10 March 1843–14 July 1843," 195, note 397, josephsmithpapers.org.
3. See Bradley and Ashurst-McGee, "Kinderhook Plates," 97–110.
4. Doctrine and Covenants 9:9.