

In 1828 New York City was a thriving and fast-growing city of 180,000 inhabitants. Not much compared to its over 8,000,000 population today, but in those days it was of fair size. One of the most interesting and important incidents in early Church history concerns a trip Martin Harris made to New York City during February of 1828. His purpose was to consult with Professor Charles Anthon and a certain "Dr. Mitchell" respecting some ancient characters that Joseph Smith had copied from the plates containing the Book of Mormon. Perhaps a brief summary of events leading up to this trip will be helpful.

At the time of his first vision in 1820 and subsequent visitations of the Angel Moroni, Joseph Smith was living with his parents in Palmyra, New York. In September of 1827 Joseph was allowed to take the plates from the Hill Cumorah. The persecution he had been under intermittently for the past seven years now became intolerable, and many attempts were made to get the plates from him. By December of the same year Joseph was glad to accept the invitation of his father-in-law, Mr. Isaac Hale, to come and live with the Hale's in Harmony, Pennsylvania.

At this point a prosperous farmer of Palmyra, Martin Harris, came on the scene. Martin Harris believed the account of Joseph Smith's visions and was especially interested in the "gold book." He visited Joseph and presented him with a gift of fifty dollars, which was used to finance the removal of Joseph and his wife to Harmony, about 100 miles to the southeast.

After purchasing a small home and parcel of land from Isaac Hale, Joseph began studying the plates. He commenced by copying several pages of the strange Nephite characters, some of which he translated by means of



the Urim and Thummim. About two months later, sometime in February 1828, Martin Harris visited the Prophet Joseph in Harmony and obtained permission to take a transcription and translation of some of the characters to some learned men in New York City. He was evidently determined to check the story of Joseph Smith concerning the nature of the characters.

His report is as follows:

"I went to the city of New York, and presented the character<sup>4</sup> which had been translated, with the translation thereof, to Professor Charles Anthon, a gentleman celebrated for his literary attainments. Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian. I then showed him those which were not yet translated, and he said that they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic; and he said they were true characters. He gave me a certificate, certifying to the people of Palmyra that they were true characters, and that the translation of such of them as had been translated was also correct. I took the certificate and put it into my pocket, and was just leaving the house, when Mr. Anthon called me back, and asked me how the young man found out that there were gold plates in the place where he found them. I answered that an angel of God had revealed it unto him.

"He then said to me, 'Let me see that certificate.' I accordingly took it out of my pocket and gave it to him, when he took it and tore it to pieces, saying that there was no such thing now as ministering angels, and that if I would bring the plates

to him he would translate them. I informed him that part of the plates were sealed, and that I was forbidden to bring them. He replied, 'I cannot read a sealed book.' I left him and went to Dr. Mitchell, who sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said respecting both the characters and the translation." (Joseph Smith 2:64-65.)

This seeking of the opinion of learned scholars on questionable material, a common enough occurrence, is really a most unique and startlingly literal fulfillment of ancient prophecies. The great Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, had prophesied 2,500 years earlier:

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee; and he saith, I cannot, for it is sealed. (Isaiah 29:11) *Italics author's.*

The Book of Mormon itself also refers to this conversation:

But, behold, it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall say unto him [Joseph Smith] to whom he shall deliver the book: take these words which are not sealed and deliver them to another [Martin Harris], that he may show them unto the learned [Anthon and Mitchell], saying: read this, I pray thee. And the learned shall say: bring hither the book, and I will read them:

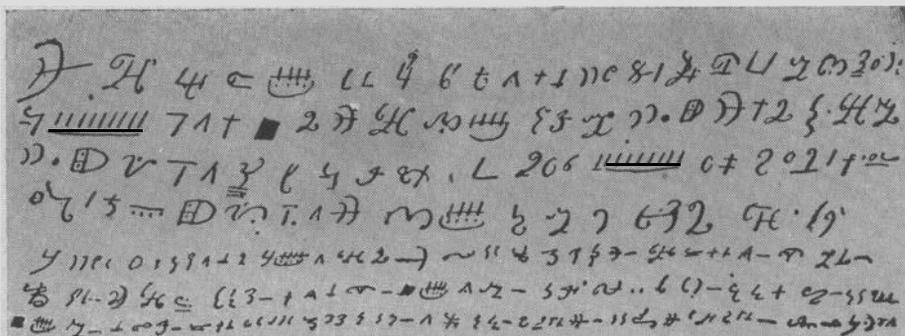
And now, because of the glory of the world and to get gain will they say this, and not for the glory of God.

And the man shall say, I cannot bring the book, for it is sealed.

Then shall the learned say, I cannot read it. (II Nephi 27:15-18.)

Martin Harris returned to Joseph Smith and then proceeded immediately to Palmyra to make arrangements regarding his farm and family so that he might assist Joseph with the translation. He returned to Harmony on April 12 and acted as scribe to Joseph until the following June.

The foregoing material raises at least three questions: (1) Who were Professor Charles Anthon and "Dr. Mitchell"? (2) Why did Martin Harris seek their opinion in preference to that of other learned men? (3)



The "Anthon Transcript" copied from the gold plates by Joseph Smith. Martin Harris took this to Professor Charles Anthon and Dr. Mitchell.

How valid was their testimony respecting the transcription and translation of ancient Ncphite-Egyptian characters?

Charles Anthon, LL.D. (1787-1867), destined to fulfil ancient prophecies, was a professor of classical studies at Columbia College (now Columbia University) in New York City for forty-seven years from 1820 until his death. In those days Columbia College, founded as King's College in 1754, was located on a plot of ground enclosed by Barclay, Church, Murray, and Chapel (now west Broadway) streets. This area today is one block north of the post office and federal building near City Hall Park. Professor Anthon, a bachelor, lived in the college, at number 7 College Green. His quarters were in one of the residence wings of the building nearest the reader in the accompanying illustration. It was probably here that the prophesied visit between Martin Harris and Professor Anthon must have taken place.

Charles was one of eight children born to Dr. George Christian Anthon, a German surgeon, and his second wife, Genevieve Jadot, who made their home in New York City. Young Charles was probably the most brilliant student who had ever attended Columbia College. He won so many prizes and honors that, to give other students a chance, his name was withheld from scholastic competition.

At first his main interest was law, but in 1820, one year after being admitted to the bar, he became adjunct professor of Greek and Latin at Columbia College and in 1830 was advanced to professor of Greek language and literature. A contemporary of Professor Anthon described him as:

. . . a man whose personal appearance harmonized singularly with his character. In person he was very large, strongly built, and of a most imposing presence. His head was a very fine one, the forehead high, massive and well-proportioned. His eyes were black and deeply set, and extremely sharp and piercing. The lower part of his face was square, massive, somewhat heavy, but extremely firm. . . . He was always exceedingly neat in personal appearance, dressing with care and nicety. . . .

The *Dictionary of American Biography* adds,

Though brilliant in conversation and of a cheerful disposition, he had a few familiar friends and almost never appeared in general society or in places of public amusement. (Vol. I, p. 313.)

Dr. Anthon was a prolific writer in the area of classical studies and

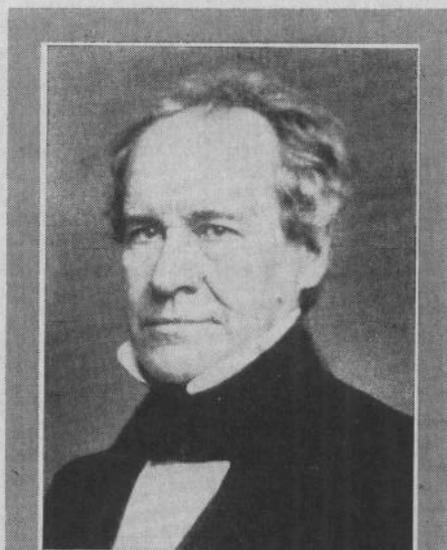
for more than thirty years produced at least one volume annually.

Each of his textbooks passed through several editions, and for thirty years, about the middle of the nineteenth century, his influence upon the study of the classics in the United States was probably greater than that of any other one man. (*Ibid.* Vol. I, p. 314.)

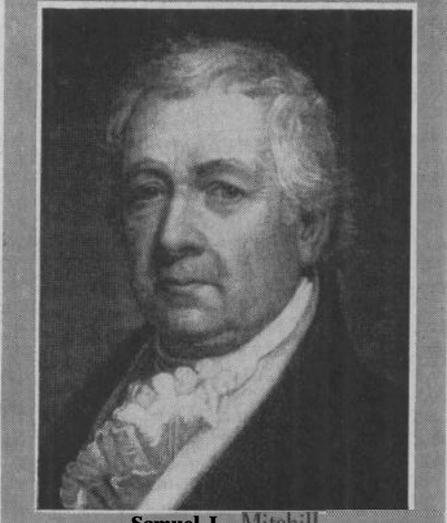
So much for Anthon, a very real person, and widely known in 1828.

Establishing the identity of "Dr. Mitchell" is somewhat more complicated. *The Dictionary of American Biography*, a comprehensive and reliable source of American biography, lists three Mitchells and thirty-two Mitchells. Among them are several who could possibly have been this "Dr. Mitchell." The most likely candidates are:

(1) Nahum Mitchell, 1767-1853, American jurist, born in Massachusetts. (2) Samuel Augustus Mitchell, 1702-1868, American geographer, born in Bristol, Connecticut. He set



Charles Anthon



Samuel L. Mitchell

tled in Philadelphia where he prepared textbooks, maps, and geographic manuals. (3) Stephen Mix Mitchell, 1743-1835, American jurist and legislator, born Wethersfield, Connecticut, member Continental Congress 1783-1788, U. S. Senator 1793-1795, Chief Justice, Connecticut Supreme Court, 1801-1818.

Unfortunately Martin Harris never referred to this learned man except as "Dr. Mitchell." References to him in Church history are scanty and sometimes vague. One suggests that he was a certain Dr. Samuel Mitchell. Another states he may have been a Dr. Mitchell of Philadelphia. (Both writers were apparently thinking of Samuel Augustus Mitchell mentioned above.) Still another confuses "Dr. Mitchell" with a Dr. Coit, whom we will mention below.

However, a non-Mormon writer well qualified to shed some light on the subject rules out all the above candidates. This writer is Professor Anthon himself. In two of his letters,<sup>2</sup> one dated February 17, 1834, to Mr. E. D. Howe of Painsville, Ohio, and the other dated April 3, 1841, to Rev. Dr. T. W. Coit, Rector of Trinity Church, Rochelle, West Chester County, New York, we find the following statements: In the Howd letter, Anthon wrote,

Some years ago, a plain and apparently simple-hearted farmer called on me with a note from Dr. Mitchell, of our city, now deceased [italics mine], requesting me to decipher, if possible, the paper which the farmer would hand me. (*Mormonism Unveiled* E. D. Howe, p. 270.)

This would fix the date of "Dr. Mitchell's" death sometime between 1828 and 1834. The previously mentioned three candidates all died after 1834. In the Coit letter, Anthon writes,

Many years ago--the precise date I do not know. (Continued on following page.)

Charles Anthon, LL.D. (1787-1867), the man destined to fulfil ancient prophecies, was Adjunct Professor of Greek and Latin at Columbia College from 1820-1830, Jay Professor of Greek and Latin, 1830-1857, and Professor of Greek Language, 1857-1867. An oil painting based on this c. 1860 photograph hangs in the Men's Faculty Club at Columbia University.

Samuel Latham Mitchell, M.D., LL.D. (1764-1831), probably the "Dr. Mitchell" who "sanctioned" what Professor Anthon had said, and thereby became instrumental in fulfilling the ancient prophecies regarding the Book of Mormon. From a painting by H. Inman.

(Photos courtesy Department of Columbiana, Columbia University.)

## “I Cannot Read a Sealed Book”

(Continued from preceding page)

not now recollect a plain looking country-man called upon me with a letter from Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell . . . [Italics mine.]

We now have good reason to believe that “Dr. Mitchell” and Dr. Samuel L. Mitchill are one and the same.

There is a slight discrepancy in the statements of Anthon and Martin Harris. The latter says that he “went to Dr. Mitchell who sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said,” and Anthon writes that Harris came to him “with a letter from Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell.” Very likely Martin Harris did go to the more famous “Dr. Mitchell” first and obtained a note of introduction to Anthon and then returned to “Dr. Mitchell” to inform him as to what Anthon had said. “Dr. Mitchell” was no doubt curious about what Anthon would make of the characters.

According to *Longworth's Directory of the City of New York, 1828-1829* there was only one Samuel Mitchell in the city, and he was a lampmaker, obviously not “Dr. Mitchell.” However, there is a Samuel L. Mitchill, M.D., listed as living at 47 White Street. Further research reveals that in 1828 a Samuel Latham Mitchill, M.D., was a vice-president of Rutgers Medical College located on Duane Street near Broadway. We also know that this Dr. Mitchill was in New York City during February 1828, for on February sixteenth of that year, “Dr. Mitchill [delivered] in the city hall, an address on the late Thos. Addis Emmet.” This Dr. Mitchill, born 1776, died in 1831, and thereby complies with the death before 1834 of “Dr. Mitchell,” as mentioned above in the Howe letter. He also resided in New York City, as did the “Dr. Mitchell” mentioned in the Howe letter.

Samuel Latham Mitchill was of Quaker parentage, the son of Robert and Mary (Latham) Mitchill of North Hemstead, Long Island, New York. His early studies were in the classics. After receiving his medical and scientific training in New York and Edinburgh, he was appointed to the chair of natural history, chemistry, and agriculture at Columbia College in 1792. He was a man of many talents and much energy. In addition to teaching he was twice in the U. S. House of Representatives, 1801-1804 and 1810-1813; a senator

from 1804-1809; professor, College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, 1807-1826; and an organizer and a vice-president of Rutgers Medical College during its brief existence, 1826-1830.

First, last, and always Mitchill was a promoter of science. He has been called the “Nestor of American Science”; he was a member of dozens of scientific and scholarly societies and wrote scores of learned books, pamphlets, articles, etc., on a multitude of subjects.<sup>4</sup> His contemporaries described him as “a living encyclopedia” and “a chaos of knowledge.” According to the *Dictionary of American Biography*:

. . . through the sincerity of his interest, the extent of his learning, and the simple amiability of his character, he won renown both at home and abroad as a man of science and was able to exert a profound influence in the promotion of scientific inquiry and in the practical application of scientific principles of life. (Vol. XIII. p. 71.)

It is very possible, therefore, that “Dr. Mitchell” was the learned Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill, and that both Martin Harris and Dr. Charles Anthon simply used a variant and more common spelling of the man's last name. Further evidence of his identity and connection with Martin Harris may turn up some day in the still incomplete collection of Dr. Mitchill's papers.

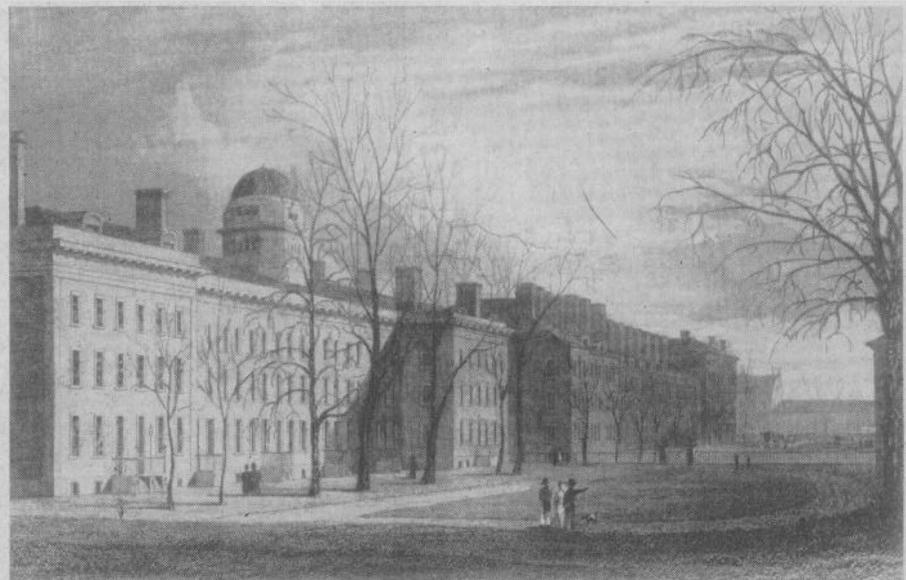
The answer to question (2), “Why would Martin Harris have gone to Anthon and Mitchill in preference

to other learned men?” has partially been answered. Both these men were highly esteemed as great scholars. Anthon was the greatest classical scholar of his day in the United States, and Mitchill was pre-eminent among American scientists.

Both men were accomplished linguists. Anthon knew at least Latin, Greek, French, and German. Mitchill knew German, Latin, and was capable of “deciphering a Babylonian brick,” or holding his own “in a profound exegetical disquisition on Kennicott's Hebrew Bible with the great Jewish Rabbi, Gershom Seixas.” They were both in the main stream of New York intellectual and cultural life. Anthon was a popular lecturer at the New York Athenaeum where, in 1826, he discoursed on Latin literature during the same season that Samuel F. B. Morse lectured on painting and William Cullen Bryant held forth on poetry. Mitchill was a founder of the New York Historical Society in 1804 and of the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1814. [Hereafter I shall use the Mitchill spelling in this article.]

In some ways Mitchill is of more interest than Anthon. Some authorities say that he was probably the most versatile man of science of his day. He had an encyclopedic memory, and ranked high in his range of interest and studies in all fields of knowledge.

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(Photo courtesy of the Department of Columbia University)

Columbia College looking east to City Hall Park, 1831. Dr. Anthon's living quarters were located in one of the residence-wings of the building. In 1857 Columbia College moved uptown to land now occupied by Rockett Center. In 1897 Columbia moved to its present home on 116th Street.

## "I Cannot Read a Sealed Book"

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Drs. Anthon and Mitchill were evidently recommended to Martin Harris as the outstanding linguistic and scientific scholars in the eastern United States, and so, because of their great learning and their brief association with Martin Harris, they unknowingly fulfilled ancient prophecies.

Now for the most important question (3): "How valid was the testimony of Anthon and Mitchill respecting the transcription and translation of ancient Nephite-Egyptian records?" When Martin Harris learned the characters were authentic and were known to scholars, he must have been jubilant. This would account for his enthusiastic substantiation of Joseph Smith's story.

According to Martin Harris, Dr. Anthon said that "the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian." Dr. Mitchill is reported to have "sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said." It is important that we realize that even though the statement of Martin Harris is contained in the Pearl of Great Price (Joseph Smith 2:64-65), the Prophet is only reporting what Martin Harris said happened and is not necessarily vouching for what Dr. Anthon and Dr. Mitchill reputedly said.

There are three interpretations of the Martin Harris statement regarding his visit with Drs. Anthon and Mitchill:

(1) Martin Harris made the whole story up. But this is hardly tenable. He was skeptical in the first place; that is why he went to New York City, and he certainly had nothing to gain by falsifying evidence to support the almost fantastic story of the penniless and persecuted Prophet. If Martin Harris was thinking about making money from the Book of Mormon, it was not necessary for him to go to the trouble and expense of visiting New York City.

(2) Drs. Anthon and Mitchill made up their stories and pretended knowledge they did not have. Why would highly respected men of learning place their reputation in jeopardy merely to impress an obscure farmer? Did they wish to share some of the wealth and fame that exploitation of the golden plates might bring? This is possible, for the Book of Mormon itself says,

And the learned shall say: Bring hither the book, and I will read them:

And now, because of the glory of the world, and to get gain, will they say this, and not for the glory of God. (See 2 Nephi 27:15-16.)

However the third interpretation, that Anthon and Mitchill recognized the characters as Egyptian, is, I believe, the most probable. In 1828

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*The courage to live with  
uncertainty...*

*Richard L. Evans*

EVERY DAY BRINGS its own news, its own changes, its own uncertainties and decisions. Not for any of us is life always or ever altogether controllable or predictable or safe or certain. We all have to adjust to changes. We all have to learn to live with some uncertainty. We all have to acquire the courage to live life as it is, and not as we wish it were—for no day perhaps proceeds precisely as was planned. (Few things proceed precisely as planned. Some experiences are richer and finer and more meaningful than we thought they would be. Some are more disappointing and less satisfying than we thought they would be—but few days, few lives, are lived precisely as planned.) Every phone call, every unopened letter, every message from every source carries with it some uncertainty. We never know what the next call will convey—what the bearers of news will bring. But we cannot and must not sit and waste life with waiting and worrying about everything that could happen or every thing that might happen. We have to have faith; we have to have courage—for it is as if every scene and every set of circumstances were posted with this familiar sign: "Subject to change without notice." And we cannot afford to let the good times, the happy times, the satisfying times be overshadowed with the worry that they won't last. A man must be grateful for what he has, for what he has had, for what he can count on, and not despondent or ungrateful for what he hasn't or for what he can't count on. "Courage," observed Samuel Johnson, "is the greatest of all the virtues." And when asked why, he answered, "Because if you haven't courage, you may not have an opportunity to use any of the others." This is a time for courage, and for faith: for faith that, despite changing scenes and uncertainties, there are great, eternal certainties, great, eternal truths; for faith in the mercy and justice and goodness of the Lord God who gave us life, and who gave it glorious meaning—and who gives us strength to see it through, with joy and purpose here, and with limitless and everlasting possibilities, if we will take it on his terms, and do the best we can with what we have—with faith, and with the kind of courage that accepts both certainties and uncertainties as they come—with gratitude for what we can count on and faith for what we can't count on.

<sup>1</sup>An approximate quotation accredited to Dr. Samuel Johnson. Original source and exact wording unknown.

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# "I Cannot Read a Sealed Book"

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there were few if any in the United States who had sufficient knowledge of the Egyptian to have vouched for the correctness of Joseph Smith's translation. The basic books which led to an understanding of the Egyptian language, Champollion's *Grammaire égyptienne* and *Dictionnaire naïve égyptienne*, appeared posthumously in 1836 and 1841. No serious work on the Egyptian language was done in the United States until the late nineteenth century.

It is probable, however, that both Dr. Anthon and Dr. Mitchill were acquainted with the appearance of Egyptian writing. Many books had been published by 1828 containing facsimiles of Egyptian characters, some of which were understood. Among the books Anthon and Mitchill may have been acquainted with were the great series *Description de l'Égypte* published between 1809 and 1823 in Paris and Champollion's *Précis du système hiéroglyphique des Anciens Égyptiens*, 2 vols., Paris, 1824. There were at least eight libraries in New York City in 1828. Some day a complete and exhaustive searching out of what books on the Egyptian language were in these libraries and the private libraries of Anthon and Mitchill may be made. This, plus research among Anthon's and Mitchill's scattered papers, may reveal more clearly their acquaintance with the Egyptian language.

B. H. Roberts, a great Church historian, supports this third interpretation:

The writer is of the opinion that there is in this statement [the before quoted story of Martin Harris] too wide a scope given to what Professor Anthon said of the translation of the Egyptian-Nephite characters.

Of course in the transcripts the professor would doubtless recognize some Egyptian characters of the hieratic Egyptian, and in the translation would also find a right interpretation of those characters. . . . He acknowledges [in the Howe and Coit letters] that the characters submitted to him were true characters, but beyond this I do not think he could give much confirmation as to the correctness of the translation.

Dr. William C. Hayes, Curator of the Egyptian Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, in a recent interview with this writer, identified several of the characters (see illustration accompanying this article) as closely resembling hieratic Egyptian characters and indicated their possible meaning. Dr. Hayes also said that the above analysis of B. H. Roberts was entirely feasible.

In summation then, we now know that Professor Anthon and Dr. Mitchill were not only historical persons, but that they were two of the most learned men in the eastern United States during the early nineteenth century. This explains Martin Harris's reason for consulting them. We have seen that they were in a position to partially confirm the authenticity of the transcribed and translated characters presented to them.

Martin Harris, as we have noted, returned to help Joseph Smith with the translation. He later became one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon and mortgaged his farm to finance its publication. It is of interest that he later returned to Dr. Anthon to present him with a copy of the Book of Mormon. Dr. Anthon, however, refused to accept it. He wished no connection whatever with the restored gospel in which he had played an important role.

## A Challenge to Parents

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The family should provide affection. No other institution can so well supply this need for emotional security in the life of every individual. If this basic desire is not filled, unbalanced personalities are likely to develop. Security, of course, does not mean overindulgence or overprotection by parents. It simply means giving the adolescent a place in the family with love and understanding. Affection must be genuine.

The child who is said to be spoiled by too much love was likely spoiled by overanxious sentimentality from parents feigning affection and not from genuine affection.

Love is the most powerful influence in the lives of people. The affection derived from loving parents in early childhood is the foundation upon which a life of integrity is created. It is often the love of a noble companion which makes life worthwhile.

This article is not an attempt to vindicate Joseph Smith; the fruits of his work have already done that. I have simply tried to give some life, understanding, and dimension to the characters and events of the remarkable visit of Martin Harris to New York City 129 years ago.

### NOTES

1. Robert D. Nesmith, "Reminiscences of Dr. Anthon," *Galaxy*, LV (September 1867), pp. 621-622.

2. Reprinted in full in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), Vol. I, pp. 102-104.

3. J. N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1908* (New York: 1926), p. 1675. Emmet was a famous Irish lawyer.

4. See biography by C. R. Hall (1934).

5. Mrs. Martha J. Lamb, Mrs. Burlon Harrison, *History of the City of New York* (New York, 1877), p. 716.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 717.

7. Other books with which Anthon and Mitchill may have been acquainted are:

Barthélemy, J. J., *Reflexions générales sur les rapports des langues égyptienne*, Paris, 1768.

Champollion J. F., *Lettre a M. Dacier relative a l'alphabet des hiéroglyphes*, Paris, 1822.

*Hiéroglyphes*, Collected by the Egyptian Society and arranged by Thomas Young, London, 1823.

Quatremere, E., *Recherches critiques et historiques sur la langue et la littérature d'Égypte*, Paris, 1808.

Sickler, F. C. L., *Die Heilige Priester-sprache der alten Aegyptier*, Hildburghausen, 1822-1826.

8. Libraries in New York City in 1828: Columbia College, New York Society Library, New York Historical Society Library, New York Athenaeum Library, New York Hospital Library, Mercantile Library, Apprentices Library, and Law Library.

9. The N. Y. Society Library (founded 1754) has copies of "shareholders books" which list who took what books out when. Preliminary research shows Anthon was a shareholder and that the library had some books relative to Egypt.

10. Roberts, op. cit., footnote pp. 101-102.