

## **Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon: The Coming of the Harris Brothers to Kirtland**

Remarks at the Harris Family Monument Dedication at the Mentor Ohio Municipal Cemetery, 20 June 2026

Corrected and enlarged, 4 July 2026

This morning we have honored Nathan Harris for his Revolutionary War service, a symbol of the liberty which our country now enjoys. The life of Rhoda Lapham Harris is also a fitting symbol of our country's first freedom as expressed in the Bill of Rights, for the climate of religious liberty established by Roger Williams in the Providence Plantations attracted not only his immediate followers like Thomas and William Harris, but also Quakers like Rhoda who thirsted to believe and practice their religion "according to the dictates of [their] own conscience."<sup>1</sup>

Tomorrow, I'll have more to say about the events surrounding the dedication of the Kirtland temple. Today, I would like to share some remarks about how the three oldest sons of Nathan and Rhoda—Emer, Martin, and Preserved—came to live in Kirtland.

### **The Brothers Embrace the Book of Mormon**

The three brothers, like many others in their part of New York state, were religious seekers who first came to know something about the restored Church of Jesus Christ because of the Book of Mormon. The first rumors about the Book of Mormon came from the youngest brother, Preserved, to the middle brother, Martin, and later were shared with the oldest brother, Emer.<sup>2</sup> When Preserved recounted the finding of the golden plates, Martin's first thought was "that the money diggers had probably dug up some old brass kettle."<sup>3</sup> But the news intrigued him enough that he determined to see Joseph Smith about it right away. After lifting a bundle containing the covered plates, Martin famously said: "I knew from the heft that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead. I retired to my bedroom and prayed God to show me concerning these things, and I covenanted that if it was his work and he would show me so, I would put forth my best effort to bring it before the world. ... [God] showed this to me by the still small voice spoken in the soul ... and [so] I was under a covenant to bring it forth."<sup>4</sup>

Martin soon became one of the three official witnesses who received an angelic confirmation of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. He kept his covenant to bring the book forth through the sacrifice of his reputation, of a considerable portion of his wealth, and, sadly, also at the expense of continued opposition from his wife, Lucy.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Brothers Gather to Ohio**

Three years after his initial introduction to the book by Preserved, Martin attended a meeting of leaders the new Church where, to his surprise, he heard Joseph Smith "reviewing and receiving the [Lord's] command to [gather the Saints] in Ohio."<sup>6</sup> Following the meeting, John Whitmer

recorded that “After the Lord had manifested the [revelation] through Joseph the Seer, there were some divisions among the congregation, some would not receive [it] as the word of the Lord.”<sup>7</sup> But Martin responded immediately to God’s command. First, he made a short trip to Kirtland in March 1831 on an urgent errand to bring copies of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith.<sup>8</sup> Then, in April, as soon as the waterways to Ohio began to thaw,<sup>9</sup> Martin took the initial steps to pay off his large debt to the printer of the Book of Mormon<sup>10</sup> and returned a second time to Ohio at the head of a company of about fifty Saints from the Manchester and Palmyra, New York areas. Kirtland would become Martin’s home for nearly forty years.

Sadly, no members of Martin’s immediate household joined him in the journey.<sup>11</sup> However, Martin must have rejoiced in the company of so many of his extended family who came with him to Ohio. These family members included his aged father and mother, Nathan and Rhoda, and the large family of his brother and sister-in-law Preserved and Nancy.<sup>12</sup> A short time later, Emer’s family also left for Ohio.<sup>13</sup> By that time Emer, Preserved, and their wives had been baptized.<sup>14</sup> And eventually, Martin’s younger sister Naomi and her husband Ezekiel Kellogg were also baptized and associated with the Church in Pontiac, Michigan until they emigrated to Utah.<sup>15</sup> At Martin’s departure, Egbert B. Grandin, the printer of the Book of Mormon, expressed both praise and lament for his neighbor, with words that could have been used for any of the three brothers:<sup>16</sup>

He has ever borne the character of an honorable and upright man, and an obliging and benevolent neighbor. He had secured to himself by honest industry a respectable fortune—and has left a large circle of acquaintances and friends to pity his delusion.

### **Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon**

Whatever else can be said about the Harris brothers, they were men of conviction who, like the New Testament apostle James, showed their faith *by their works*.<sup>17</sup> The brothers gave financially for the poor<sup>18</sup> and for the work of building up Zion.<sup>19</sup> Preserved had been the first to share the news of the Book of Mormon, Martin sacrificed dearly to bring it forth, and Emer received one of the first bound copies of the Book of Mormon from Martin.<sup>20</sup>

We are blessed to have the record of Emer’s unique testimony of the Book of Mormon in an 1856 stake conference in Provo, Utah.<sup>21</sup> For his part, Martin bore his testimony of the Book of Mormon for decades to visitors in Kirtland, and later on his deathbed in Utah in 1875.<sup>22</sup> And, in the 1840s, after the main body of the Saints had left Kirtland, Preserved made proof of his faith in the founding events of the Restoration<sup>23</sup> and also lent support to Martin’s mission to testify about the Book of Mormon in England.<sup>24</sup> At Preserved’s passing, it was said that “he bore [his trials] with patience and resignation to the will of God. His trust was in his Saviour.”<sup>25</sup>

In summary, what evidence we possess indicates that all three brothers remained true to their testimony of the Christ-centered book that brought them to Kirtland. A question that President

Dallin H. Oaks has posed about Martin as one of the three official witnesses to the Book of Mormon also applies to the Harris brothers who, by their words and works, can be classed as three *unofficial* witnesses.<sup>26</sup>

How does one explain three men of good character uniting and persisting in their ... testimony to the end of their lives in the face of great ridicule and other personal disadvantage? ...

Each of the three had ample reason and opportunity to renounce his testimony. ... All three went their separate ways, with no common interest to support a collusive effort. Yet ... not one of these ... said anything that cast any shadow on [the Book of Mormon's] truthfulness.

### **“We Must Use the Book of Mormon to Bring Us to Christ”**

I close with President Oaks’ testimony that the Christ-centered nature of the Book of Mormon:<sup>27</sup>

is its essential feature and that is the reason why we are commanded to study it continually. We must use the Book of Mormon to bring us to Christ.

And, I would add, we must also use the Book of Mormon to help us fortify our faith in Christ—remaining ever-willing to go where the Lord wants us to go—following in the footsteps of the three Harris brothers, whose faith brought them to Kirtland in 1831.

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## Notes

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1 Articles of Faith 1:11.

2 Martin is reported as saying: “The first time I heard of the matter my brother Preserved Harris, who had been in the village of Palmyra, asked me if [I] had heard about Joseph Smith, jr., having a golden bible” (M. Harris *et al.*, *Mormonism—No. II*, p. 167. Cf. R. E. Romig, *Martin Harris's Kirtland*, p. 75).

3 M. Harris *et al.*, *Mormonism—No. II*, p. 167. Cf. R. E. Romig, *Martin Harris's Kirtland*, p. 75.

4 M. Harris *et al.*, *Mormonism—No. II*, pp. 169–170. Cf. R. E. Romig, *Martin Harris's Kirtland*, pp. 75–76.

5 See M. Harris *et al.*, *Mormonism—No. II*, pp. 100–101. In 1830, due to Martin's involvement with the Church and perhaps other marriage problems, “Lucy departed the household and established a home apart” (*ibid.*, p. 162. See also pp. 180–181, 202).

6 S. E. Black *et al.*, *Martin Harris*, p. 196.

7 J. Whitmer, *John Whitmer History*, chapter 1, p. 9. <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847/13> (accessed June 14, 2026). Cf. D. Q. Cannon *et al.*, *Far West*, 2 January 1831, conference minutes, p. 5.

8 J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, *Documents 1*, July 1828-June 1831, Letter to Martin Harris, 22 February 1831, pp. 262–264. Cf. S. E. Black *et al.*, *Martin Harris*, p. 198. See a newspaper report of Harris' arrival on March 12 in *Martin Harris*, *Martin Harris*. Cf. R. E. Romig, *Martin Harris's Kirtland*, p. 25.

9 S. E. Black *et al.*, *Martin Harris*, p. 205.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 200–202, 225–227.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 210–211.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 211–212. See L. A. Harris *et al.*, *Martin Henderson Harris*, p. 12. See brief entry for the year 1831.

14 S. E. Black *et al.*, *Martin Harris*, pp. 202–204.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

16 Several families, *Several families*. Cf. R. E. Romig, *Martin Harris's Kirtland*, p. 24. See also S. E. Black *et al.*, *Martin Harris*, p. 210 and p. 210n67.

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17 See James 2:18.

18 *Emer*: J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Journals, 1832-1839, 9 December 1835, p. 118; J. M. Bradshaw, Emer Harris and Dennison Lott Harris, p. 176n135: contributed \$1, the equivalent of a day's wages for working in the harvest at a time when cash was in short supply (see L. A. Harris *et al.*, Martin Henderson Harris, p. 13); *Preserved*: Minutes, 16 June 1836, Minutes, 16 June 1836; J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Documents 5: October 1835–January 1838, p. 250; S. E. Black *et al.*, Martin Harris, p. 223: “has helped the poor some.”

19 *Emer*: E. Harris, ‘Moneys for the rise of Zion’ (October 25, 1831). Harris Family Papers, 1818–1969. MSS P 340, Box 3, Folder 4a; J. M. Bradshaw, Emer Harris and Dennison Lott Harris, p. 15; S. E. Black *et al.*, Martin Harris, pp. 215n83, 223; *Martin*: *ibid.*, pp. 215, 223; *Preserved*: *ibid.*, p. 223; J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Documents 5: October 1835–January 1838, pp. 249: “gave 50 to send to Zion.” See also J. M. Bradshaw, Emer Harris and Dennison Lott Harris, p. 15.

20 It has been reported that he received the *first* bound copy, but Randy Harris believes it “is highly unlikely he traveled from PA to Palmyra on the very day the first binding occurred and that Martin was there to give it to him (R. Harris, June 19, 2026). Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that Martin kept that copy and later presented it to his brother. One way this claim could be tested (at least to a degree but probably never definitively) is to compare the typographical errors for the two copies that are candidates for this claim with other early copies to determine the relative sequence of their printing with other known early copies, since the errors were gradually addressed over time. With help from Tod Harris and Jeremy Talmage, this possibility is being explored as of this writing. See discussion and sources in J. M. Bradshaw, Emer Harris and Dennison Lott Harris, pp. 9, 168nn47–60.

21 E. Harris, Discourse of Emer Harris, 6 April 1856.

22 See S. E. Black *et al.*, Martin Harris, pp. 500–508.

23 Though both Martin and Preserved fell out with Joseph Smith when difficulties arose in Kirtland in the 1830s, in 1841 they are reported as continuing to believe “that the work in its commencement was a genuine work of the Lord” (Mormons). It is also reported that Preserved was a member of a Strangite high council in 1846, thus indirectly reaffirming his belief in the authenticity of the Prophet’s early revelatory experiences (F. J. Young, Strangite Mormons, p. 89; S. E. Black *et al.*, Martin Harris, p. 283n73). After the Prophet’s death in 1844, James J. Strang led a group of Saints who accepted Strang’s claims to be Joseph Smith’s successor.

24 S. E. Black *et al.*, Martin Harris, pp. 331–332. Though Martin’s mission was sponsored by the Strangites, his biographers concluded that “he was more interested in conveying [his] conviction [of the Book of Mormon] than in proselyting on behalf of Strangism” (*ibid.*, p. 334)

25 Died.

26 D. H. Oaks, Witness, p. 36.

27 D. H. Oaks, Another Testament, p. 67.