

The Restoration of Mormonism to Erie County, Pennsylvania

Steven C. Harper

He dies! Creation's awful Lord
Jehovah, Christ, Eternal Word!
To come in thunder from the skies;
To bid the buried world arise.
The Earth his footstool;
Heaven his throne;
Redeemer! may thy will be done.

This stanza dramatically concluded a verse on the front page of the *Erie Gazette* on 13 May 1830. It catered to and expressed the sentiments of the many millennial-minded Erie County, Pennsylvania, residents. Most of these people looked for signs of the times “to come in thunder from the skies” rather than from books long since buried in the ground. That is why the *Gazette*'s next article bore the title, “Silly Fanaticism.” It reported that “a work has recently been published in the western part of the state of New York, entitled Book of Marmon” [sic].

The article identified Joseph Smith Jr., a twenty-five-year-old farmer from Manchester, New York, as the book's author and its translator. According to a preface titled a “Brief Explanation About the Book of Mormon,” it “is a sacred record of peoples in ancient America, and was engraved upon sheets of metal.”¹ Its chief compiler was an American prophet named Mormon—hence the title. According to the book, “in or

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about A.D. 421," Moroni, Mormon's son and the last of the "prophet-historians" to write on the plates, "sealed the sacred record and hid it up unto the Lord, to be brought forth in the latter days." In 1823, "this same Moroni, then a resurrected personage, visited the Prophet Joseph Smith and subsequently delivered the engraved plates to him." Smith then translated them "by the gift of God."² In March 1830, the finished product came off Palmyra, New York's Grandin Press. Samuel Smith, Joseph's younger brother and one of eleven men to declare eyewitness testimony of the original plates, filled a knapsack with copies and set out to convince his neighbors that the primitive Christian gospel had been restored plainly, a new prophet had been called authoritatively, and new scripture had been revealed for all who were ready to read.

Almost everywhere Samuel Smith and his few fellow believers went, they gathered some converts; in a few places, they gathered a hundred or more.³ Erie County proved to be such a place, though research in Erie County turns up little direct evidence of a significant Mormon presence in the 1830s. While researching Pennsylvania converts to Mormonism in 1974, V. Alan Curtis wrote to George Brewer, secretary of the Erie County Historical Society, asking, "Do you know of any Mormon information . . . in your area in the 1830s?" The response reads in part, "I have searched several county histories and find no reference to them although the history of numerous other religious organizations is given in considerable detail. Apparently there were no Mormons in this area at that time."⁴ Family historians Cheryl Harmon Bean and Pamela Call Johnson have found otherwise. Their creative and painstaking mining of sundry sources yielded a list naming 121 Erie County residents who converted to Mormonism between 1831–33. Additional evidence for unnamed converts puts the total near 150.⁵

This paper relies on Bean and Johnson's convert list for dual purposes. When combined with contemporary newspapers and the writings of Mormon missionaries and their converts, the list informs a narrative of the attitudes and events responsible for the proselytizing, conversion, and migration of converts—the narrative's purpose being to restore Mormonism to Erie County historiography. Further, the convert list underpins a case study. Data gathered from census, tax, and genealogical records inform empirical assertions about the social origins of the converts and make it possible to posit informed arguments about the nature of early Mormonism. An article with dual purposes deserves a two-headed thesis, which is that there were Mormons in Erie County in the early 1830s and, further, that they were drawn to the faith not by superstition, social dislocation, or "silly fanati-

cism,” as antebellum editors asserted and as slightly less-biased historians have maintained, but by a combination of tangible evidence, rational thought, spiritually satisfying manifestations, and the society of family and friends.

The Great Commission

Joseph Smith felt responsible to fulfill what Christian theologians call the Great Commission, the direction delivered by Jesus to his disciples to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). To his first few followers, Smith announced revelations that called the men among them to missionary service. They were to set aside their employments to preach the importance of repentance, faith in Jesus Christ, and baptism by immersion. They were to do so humbly, “full of love, having faith, hope, and charity, being temperate in all things.”⁶

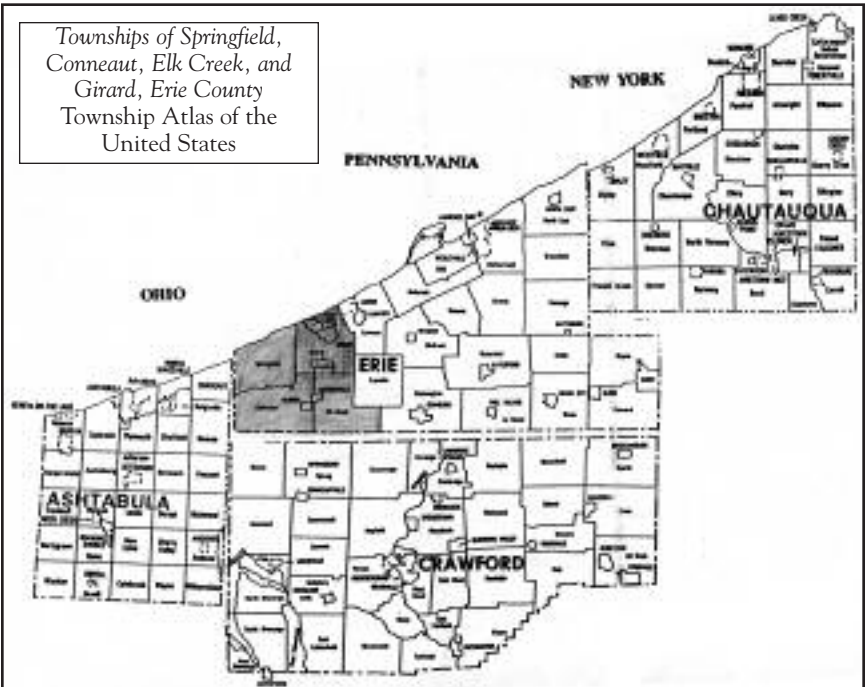
Jared Carter and Ebenezer Page were among those who acted on this message. Carter, a thirty-year-old Vermont native, joined the Church in February 1831 after he became convinced of the Book of Mormon’s claims. In September 1831, he was ordained an elder and embarked on a mission with twenty-four-year-old Ebenezer Page. They traveled from Kirtland, Ohio, northeastward along Lake Erie. They were to “preach by the way,” meaning wherever they went. Erie County lay astride the oft-traveled road between upstate New York, where the Church was founded, and Kirtland, which became Church headquarters in 1831. The location of Erie County, therefore, meant it was a frequent host to Mormon missionaries. While Carter and Page were there in September 1831, they preached, baptized one, and ordained a previously converted man, one “Brother Reed,” probably John, as a lay leader of the Church. Then, they ministered among their proselytes for a few more days before continuing their “journey and mission” toward Carter’s native Vermont.⁷

In February 1832, Samuel Smith, Joseph’s younger brother, was accompanied on a mission to Erie County by a store clerk and former Campbellite preacher named Orson Hyde, recently converted in Kirtland, Ohio. This combination proved particularly persuasive to potential converts. Hyde was a thorough, informed, and rational preacher who embraced Mormonism heartily. Smith was an unlearned, unsophisticated person from whom converts could hear how much the Book of Mormon plates weighed, since his testimony to having “hefted” them was printed in each copy.

They preached in Springfield Township from 14–29 February 1832, enjoying much success. They found residents ranging from unwilling to “repent” to “somewhat believing” to “considerable believing” to “truly much



Pennsylvania County Map
 Eighth Edition of the Handy Book for Genealogists



convinced that these things are true.”⁸ On 19 February, they preached to “an attentive congregation” and “labored in private with a Christian preacher after meeting.” The next day, Hyde delivered a sermon at Joseph Hartshorn’s home in Springfield, during which he “gave out an invitation for them to come forward for Baptism. Three came forward and one was the Christian preacher. I immersed them,” Hyde wrote, “and we had a joyful season.”⁹

On 27 February, Hyde and Smith “baptized two young men, ordained Brother Simons an Elder, [and] instructed him in the knowledge of the kingdom.” After making sure Simons had a copy of the essential bylaws of the Church and was ready to serve as the lay leader of his fellow neophytes, the missionaries continued eastward toward Erie.¹⁰ Backsliding converts, including Simons, were common. When Carter and Page passed through Springfield again in late April 1832, they emphasized reclamation. Carter wrote in his journal, “after we had preached a few times, eight were baptized and two out of the three that had fallen away reclaimed.”¹¹

This pattern of preaching in public and in private, with emphasis on “nourishing” new converts, continued, resulting in a steady stream of conversions in the three most western townships of Erie County (Springfield, Conneaut, and Elk Creek), but the farther east they went, the less successful Erie County missionaries became. At Erie, they found “prospects poor.” At Wesleyville, they preached “without much spirit and without much effect,” with similar results in Harbor Creek. At Fairview, according to Carter, “our testimony was as idle words to the people and we were filled with a desire to go out of this place.”¹² No wonder Evan Greene and John Boynton concentrated their efforts in Springfield, Conneaut, and Elk Creek townships, where they arrived late in December 1832 “after a cold & tedious tramp of about two days.”¹³

The eighteen-year-old Greene was already an experienced Mormon preacher. He and the newly converted, twenty-one-year-old Boynton began their ministry by visiting earlier converts “anxious to hear more.” Greene and Boynton “exhorted them to constancy” and then went to work proselytizing. By 20 January 1833, conversions had dramatically increased in frequency. Between 20–21 January, Greene and Boynton baptized fourteen. A week later, at Elk Creek, Greene “had the pleasure of baptizing five others.”¹⁴ On 2 February, these converts were confirmed as members of the Church and instructed further on “the church articles and laws.” On 20 February, the missionaries held a meeting “for the purpose of baptizing one or two and baptized eight.”¹⁵

Increasing opposition and occasionally open persecution accompanied the successes of Greene and Boynton. It was never unusual for individuals or groups to oppose Mormons or other preachers during sermons or public dis-

cussions. But while Mormon converts were being confirmed at Elk Creek on 2 February, antagonists were “around the house firing guns and covering up the chimney.”¹⁶ Whereas on 14 February Greene wrote of visiting cordially with some “very fine” Baptists at Springfield, by 17 March, while he preached at a crowded Elk Creek school, a “Baptist man arose and began throwing clubs but put the cudgel in our hands and we used it.” After the dust settled, Greene “had the privilege of baptizing three.” There appears, therefore, to be a direct correlation between the inroads of Mormonism in Erie County and the escalation of “open opposition.” At Springfield, where converts were nearly 2 percent of the population in 1833, non-Mormon residents voiced less opposition than those at Elk Creek, where converts accounted for close to 10 percent of the population.¹⁷

By mid 1833, the Church of Christ (Mormonism’s official title in the early 1830s) was well established in Erie County, having well over a hundred local members. By then, some of the first few converts of Carter, Page, Hyde, and Samuel Smith were working closely with Greene and Boynton to convert their extended families, resulting in several complex kinships in the county having ties to the Church and its missionaries. Intermarriages among converts and the conversions of extended families already tied by marriage were common. A handful of surnames account for a majority of Erie County converts, and clearly the missionaries relied on residents to help circulate appointments among extended family, friends, and neighbors.

Converts often lived in close proximity to each other.¹⁸ In 1830, in Springfield Township, Andrew McAdams, Benjamin Spencer, Erastus Rudd, Horace Simmons, and Randall Wheeler and their families were near neighbors. Spencer’s wife, Abigail, was Wheeler’s daughter, as was her sister Experience, wife of Erastus Rudd and mother of nineteen, including four sets of twins! Abigail and Experience Wheeler were aunts of Phebe Thompson, whose mother-in-law was a sister of Andrews Tyler, who figures prominently in the narrative hereafter.¹⁹

Writing of conversion to early Christianity, historian Peter Brown noted that “ties of family, marriages, and loyalties to heads of households had been the most effective means of recruiting members of the church, and had maintained the adherence of the average Christian.” The same proved true of Erie County converts. Historian Robin Lane Fox added that “above all we should give weight to the presence and influence of friends. It is a force which so often escapes the record, but it gives shape to everyone’s personal life. One friend might bring another to the faith,” and the anxieties associated with conversion are eased when new converts find old friends among new brothers and sisters.²⁰ Sociologist Rodney Stark wrote:

Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semi-closed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks.²¹

The Mormon missionaries were successful networkers, and converts seem naturally to have wanted their families and friends to learn the good news.

The multiplication of converts made life easier for the missionaries in another way as well. The earliest Erie County missionaries begged strangers or friendly but unconverted residents for supper and a bed. Greene and Boynton were well fed by Church members, in whose homes they reposed comfortably overnights. When they left Erie County for Crawford County and other less proselytized areas, they returned to former ways and means. On 24 March in Crawford, they “stayed all night” with an especially curious “Christian Elder.” The next day about noon, Greene wrote, they “came to a man’s hovel in the woods. . . . They asked us to take dinner with them which we did.”

Several different Mormon missionaries were in and out of Erie County frequently after mid 1833.²² With a strong congregation in the area, missionaries traveling back and forth between Church headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio, and mission “fields” farther east paused to get refreshment and encouragement and to give instruction and support. En route to Ontario in early October 1833, Joseph Smith visited Springfield and Elk Creek. He was, to Mormon converts, “as Moses,” and it is no wonder that at Springfield he “had a great congregation” that “paid good attention.”²³

The Dimensions of Conversion

That attentive congregation gathered in the home of Andrews Tyler, “an humble log cabin.” Tyler and his family, newly converted to Mormonism, were undoubtedly in attendance, including a son, Daniel. Though primary accounts of early Mormon conversions are numerous, few are available for Erie County converts. Daniel Tyler wrote one in 1881 to instruct “young readers” and to “exhort all parents,” which compromises its historical value to some degree.²⁴ Even so, if read cautiously and contextually in the light of numerous memoirs written closer to the events, Tyler’s conversion narrative is instructive. Parts of it are so detailed, and can be corroborated by other sources, that they may have been reconstructed from a diary.²⁵ At the very least, Daniel Tyler’s account sheds some light on why one young man, his parents, and siblings became Mormons in 1832 in

Springfield, Erie County, Pennsylvania.

As a boy in 1823, Daniel Tyler moved with his family to Springfield from the Finger Lakes region of New York. Born in 1816, Tyler was fifteen years old when, as he wrote, Samuel Smith and Orson Hyde “came to our neighborhood and held a few meetings.” Tyler remembered:

Elder Smith read the 29th chapter of Isaiah at the first meeting and delineated the circumstances of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, of which he said he was a witness. He knew his brother Joseph had the plates, for the prophet had shown them to him, and he had handled them and seen the engravings thereon. His speech was more like a narrative than a sermon. Elder Hyde made a few closing remarks and appointed another meeting.²⁶

The message influenced members of the Tyler family in various ways. Daniel read parts of the Book of Mormon and “believed every word” of Smith and Hyde. So did his sister, whom he left unnamed; she “was resolved to be baptized.” Daniel’s older brother, William, discouraged Book of Mormon reading since “good people said it carried with it the spirit of witchcraft, which caused those who read it to be bewitched and join the ‘Mormon’ church.” Daniel reflected amusingly that this seemed unusual since William tended to be “wild and sometimes profane . . . and I was quite taken by surprise to hear him quote what ‘good people said,’ as previously I had never heard him speak of them except in derision.”²⁷

Andrews Tyler, Daniel’s father, had long since become convinced that “there was not a true believer in the world,” basing his conclusion on the absence of the spiritual gifts manifested in biblical Christianity. According to Daniel, he “soon became a bitter enemy” of the missionaries. “He admitted that the ‘Mormon’ doctrines were true, but claimed that the members of that church had adopted them to cover up a fraud.” Andrews Tyler, like many of his neighbors, initially reacted to Mormonism as if it fulfilled the biblical prophecy that false prophets would come in “sheep’s clothing.” He therefore opposed “telling ridiculous stories” and performing “pretended miracles.” “My mother,” Daniel wrote of Elizabeth Comins Tyler, “said but little either way.”²⁸

Divisions within the Tyler family continued along those lines “for several months,” during which Daniel “continued praying,” his sister’s “mind was bent on being baptized at the first opportunity,” and William and others “told her they would shoot any ‘Mormon’ Elder who dared to baptize her.” This proved to be bravado. When Hyrum Smith, Joseph’s older brother, arrived in Springfield in December 1832, Andrews Tyler “told him that his daughter, who was present, was bent on being baptized into his church, stat-

ing at the same time, that the Elder who baptized her would do so at his peril." Daniel Tyler attributed to Smith a reply that "quite mildly" explained to father Tyler, "If our doctrine be true, which we testify it is, if you prevent your daughter from embracing it, the sin will be on your head, not on ours or your daughters." Daniel Tyler may have been generous with his reconstruction, but such a response was characteristic of Hyrum Smith. In any case, Andrews Tyler consented to his daughter's baptism, which Smith performed in Lake Erie either in December 1832 or the following January. Clearly, Daniel's sister "believed it to be her duty to be baptized."²⁹

Evidently, the influence of his wife and children, combined with the tactics of the missionaries, softened Andrews Tyler's opposition to Mormonism. "He began to think that possibly the 'Mormons' were right and he was wrong." The intellectual framework that informed the Tylers' conversion to Mormonism seems to have followed the pattern common to most converts. Interpreted this way, the reasons for Andrews Tyler's initial hostility and his eventual submission are related rather than contradictory. He had been acculturated by the Bible in an increasingly democratic culture. He had little respect for learned divines, believing he could read the Bible as well as they. Tyler's reading of the scriptures confirmed his conviction of the primitive Christian gospel preached by the Apostles, and he was especially adamant, as were increasing numbers of his neighbors as American religion grew increasingly pluralistic, "that the signs spoken of should follow those who believed."³⁰

Signs, specifically visions, followed, or rather led, the Tyler family into Mormonism. Andrews Tyler's aged father taught his son biblicism and a distaste for pluralism and affirmed that "the true church" would soon be "organized with all the apostolic gifts and blessings." On his deathbed in 1829, grandfather Tyler experienced a vision that influenced the whole family. Daniel wrote that "after my grand-father was taken with his last illness, he told my parents that an angel appeared to him clothed in white, and told him he would not recover, for his sickness was unto death." He died ten days later, and the Tylers kept the strange story to themselves "to save ridicule." Privately, the vision was a cause of wonder. It "seemed so strange," Daniel wrote, "that my parents hardly knew whether to attribute it to imagination or a reality, as they could not question his sincerity."³¹

With these visions in mind, Andrews Tyler "continued his researches of the scriptures." Meanwhile, "he never allowed a traveling minister to leave the neighborhood without an argument." So after Samuel Smith's unusual testimony, Tyler, "as his custom was, sprung his usual question about the spiritual gifts and was quite surprised to hear Elder Smith say, 'that is our doc-

trine, and we have those gifts in our church.”³² Tyler wrestled with this declaration; for several months, he struggled with the tension between his hope for a restoration of signs and gifts and the prospect that the missionaries were peddling “pretended miracles.” He could not decide finally whether they were the false prophets of which his Bible said beware or true ones come to clarify the various competing Christianities.

For Andrews and Elizabeth Tyler, that question was settled by more visions. Daniel wrote that “my grand-father appeared to my father in a dream, and told him that this was the people [the Mormons] he prophesied of while living.” Near this same time, “Elizabeth Comins Tyler had a remarkable vision.” As Daniel remembered it:

She saw a man sitting upon a white cloud, clothed in white from head to foot. He had on a peculiar cap, different from any she had ever seen, with a white robe, underclothing, and moccasins. It was revealed to her that this person was Michael, the Archangel. She was sitting in the house drying peaches when she saw the heavenly vision, but the walls were no bar between her and the angel, who stood in the open space above her.³³

These experiences convinced Andrews and Elizabeth Tyler, and they converted. “Then,” Daniel wrote, “my persecuting brothers followed,” which left him the only family member remaining a non-Mormon, not because he disbelieved but out of concern for his sinful state. After much prayer for forgiveness, Daniel too received baptism.³⁴

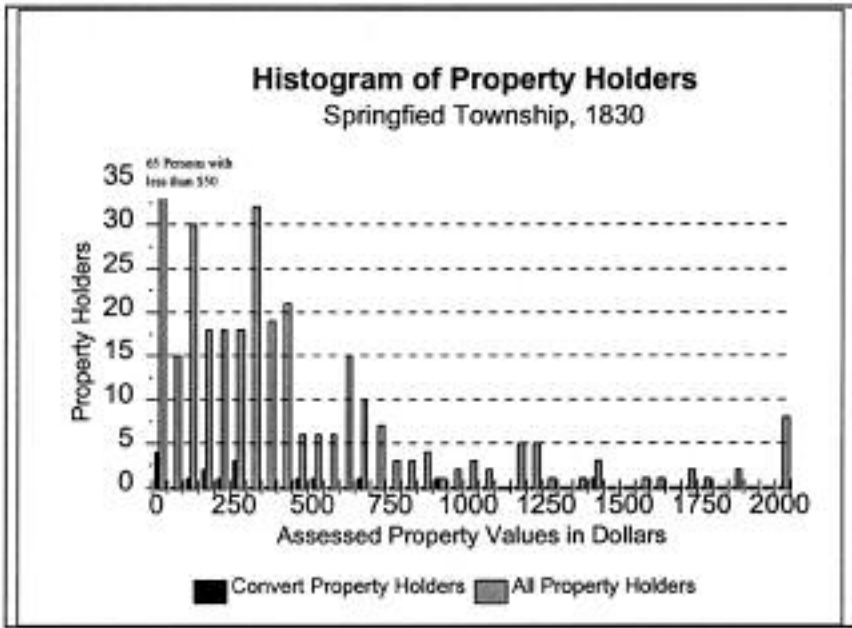
The Social Origins of Early Mormons

Besides being visionary, what kind of people were the Tylers and their neighbors who became Mormons? Are there distinguishing social characteristics that might identify people inclined to convert? Until “new history” and religious studies methods became dominant, most historians followed the *Erie Gazette* editor in attributing interest in Mormonism to silly fanaticism. One of many to depict Mormonism as pandering “to the superstitious, the gullible, and the fearful,”³⁵ the now-distinguished historian David Brion Davis wrote as a graduate student in 1953 that early Mormons “represented an outburst of mysticism and superstition.”³⁶ The persuasiveness of this argument has faded over the years, as religiosity has failed to wane among reasonable people. Its usefulness is further diminished when compared to the subjectivity of Evan Greene, the young Erie County missionary who thought of himself as open minded and progressive and who noted that it was “hard work to preach to old formal professors who are prejudiced and superstitious.”³⁷

In the late 1960s and throughout the 70s, scholars emphasized the importance of social class on converts' decision making. Mario DePillis argued vaguely that early Mormons were characterized by peripheral social status and that "prospective converts almost always lived under unstable local social, economic, or religious conditions, usually in a newly settled, value disoriented society." As part of this line of thought, DePillis maintained that "all early Mormons came from the lower but not the lowest classes."³⁸ Anyone wondering how to interpret such ambiguity is further befuddled by DePillis's data. He cited a sample of six men who joined Mormonism shortly after its organization in 1830. Three of these were owners of substantial property, modest social prestige, and benefactors of Joseph Smith. One, Martin Harris, financed the publication of the Book of Mormon. Another, Joseph Knight Sr., loaned Joseph the use of a carriage to transport the Book of Mormon plates and provided the paper and some of the food that supported Smith, his family, and scribe during the translation process. The other, Peter Whitmer Sr., furnished Joseph and his scribe lodging while they translated.

Mormon historians writing in the 1970s did not challenge Davis or DePillis empirically but translated their arguments into positive terms. Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, for example, "interpreted the characterization of Mormon converts by their nineteenth-century enemies as scum and riffraff to mean that most Mormons were very poor" and could therefore be cast as meek and humble seekers in contrast to their proud, wealth-seeking, close-minded countrymen. It is true, as sociologist Rodney Stark observed, that "the great trek west caused serious financial losses and subsequent hardship for many Mormons, but that is not pertinent to their social origins and essential class position."³⁹

"Given where and when the Mormons began," Stark argued, "the appropriate comparisons are to people in the immediate environment."⁴⁰ When Bean and Johnson's list is used as a means of identifying converts in Erie County tax records, comparisons can be made between prospective Mormons, their next-door neighbors, and residents of nearby communities. Analysis of the 1830 assessment of Springfield residents reveals that DePillis was not wrong to suggest that Mormon converts came from the "lower but not the lowest classes." All that actually means, however, is that Mormon converts were rarely among the few wealthiest property owners. Otherwise, there are no distinguishing features or patterns in property ownership among converts. They resemble their neighbors very much, as shown by a histogram describing data drawn from the Springfield assessment of 1830.



A more accurate reflector of relative status is the median taxable wealth of township residents. The median value of taxed Springfield residents was \$300, almost the exact average wealth of two townships on the oft-traveled road where missionaries reported far less success.

Tax Assessment Data from Three Erie County Townships

	Springfield	Harbor Creek	Fairview
Average	\$451	\$693	\$566
Maximum	\$10,000	\$14,440	\$6,921
Minimum	\$8	\$8	\$3
Mode	\$8	\$100	\$8
Median	\$300	\$265	\$334

Moreover, the average wealth in 1830 of men who converted less than three years later was \$303.70. These men and their families spanned a range in ownership of a single cow to the farms of John and Erastus Rudd, each val-

ued at nearly \$1,000.⁴¹ Most converts fell in between, as did their neighbors throughout the county. The men and women who converted to Mormonism were not on the peripheries of American society. Rather, they took advantage of the opportunities existing in the early republic at least as much as they endured its upheavals. This leads one to wonder, What significant common characteristics might have contributed to Mormon conversions?

A partial answer to this question rises from the experiences of Andrews and Elizabeth Tyler. They and their children were in many respects acculturated by the democratization of political, religious, and economic opportunities. They were heirs to the age of reason. "Faith as well as doubt," wrote historian Richard Bushman, "had embraced the Enlightenment by the beginning of the nineteenth century," and "Christianity claimed to be as reasonable by Enlightenment standards as science or philosophy."⁴² Among early Mormons at large, autobiographical accounts and journal entries written close to the time of conversion show convincingly that conversion came most often through an extended period of study, contemplation, and experience. Moreover, the reasonable nature of the doctrine was frequently a factor converts cited emphatically.⁴³

These were not a different kind of converts from the Tylers, who were acculturated by the "visionary culture" that permeated antebellum America, making the converts rational, democratic, and visionary all at once. The mixture of these determinants made the Tylers confident that they could discern true religion as well as learned clerics, concerned about the right way to understand their experiences, wary of talking too much about them, but deeply believing in them. Mormonism appealed to them because it gave them a heftable book to examine for themselves, to compare point by point with their cherished Bible, and to see if they "mutually and reciprocally corroborate each other."⁴⁴ They were challenged to "experiment" with it, "ponder" it, and tackle it rationally, as they were wont to do. Meanwhile, they were told that it had been revealed by an angel and translated by a visionary, semiliterate prophet who possessed an unusual spiritual gift.

The Tylers and other converts "shared membership in a class of people who believed that the heavens sometimes opened to human view" but who simultaneously sought an authoritative way to order and understand such manifestations—a way that accommodated their biblical foundation even while it provided answers to gnawing questions.⁴⁵ Through the processes of pondering, praying, weighing possibilities, and considering implications, converts who undoubtedly inhabited Erie County, Pennsylvania, until the mid 1830s became convinced that the church organized by Joseph Smith should set the boundaries for their beliefs.

No Mormons in This Area: Migration, Extinction, and Restoration

If all this took place in Erie County between 1830–33, why could George Brewer, the secretary of the Historical Society in 1974, find no evidence of Mormonism in his otherwise ample collections? Most converts migrated out of Erie County to Ohio and Missouri, then to Illinois, and, finally, in the 1840s, over the plains to the Great Basin. The same revelations that motivated missionaries to go to Erie County animated converts to leave. They believed they were ancient Israel anew, being gathered as their Bibles prophesied, to build Zion and prepare for a millennial day.⁴⁶ Thus, converts' descendants, like Bean and Johnson, are more familiar with the Great Salt Lake than with the Great Lake, Erie; they are more likely residents of southern Idaho than western Pennsylvania. By 1840, the only Mormons remaining very long in Erie County were the handful who had reconsidered their conversions. Being typical to begin with, these blended into society with no notoriety. A related reason accounting for the absence of Mormonism from the annals of Erie County is the rule that those who remain write the history. In this case, the millennial-minded residents who looked for signs of the times “to come in thunder from the skies” and county boosters, like the editor of the *Erie Gazette*, tended to view Mormonism as an embarrassing blemish on the county's history and considered it prudent to ignore the exceptional.

In 1884, a two-volume history of Erie County was published, promising readers “a history of the county, its townships, towns, villages, schools, churches, industries, etc. Portraits of early settlers and prominent men; biographies . . . etc., etc.” The inclusion of John Rudd in the Biographical Sketches, even though factually inaccurate, suggests that converts were of the same social origins as the other “respectable” people included in county histories:

JOHN RUDD (deceased), moved to Erie Co., Penn., in Aug., 1805 from Ostego Co., N.Y., with a large family, his son John having preceded him several years and commenced a distillery. He took up about 350 acres of land along the lake front, on the Moravian tract. John Rudd, Sr., died in 1830, aged eighty-two. His widow and her children becoming infatuated with the Mormon cause, about the year 1839 joined the sect and went West. Thus ended one of Erie's pioneer families.⁴⁷

The author of this passage considered conversion the equivalent of extinction, at least with respect to county history, and one must search thoroughly to find even this brief epitaph. So until they were “rediscovered” by Bean and Johnson, as far as Brewer could discover through his research in Erie County, “there were no Mormons in this area.” Instead, they became

part of the “vanished heritage” described by Erie County chronicler John Claridge.⁴⁸ But clearly, even while many Erie County residents looked for signs of the times to come in thunder from the skies, a significant number of their neighbors considered it just as likely and more compelling that such signs might also come from a book long since buried and brought to light by a visionary farmer whose explanation of restored Christianity seemed “so plain and reasonable.”⁴⁹

Notes

1. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981). Commonly cited unitalicized, the Book of Mormon claims to be an abridgment, originally written in an Egyptian alphabet and Hebrew syntax, of the theology and history of a group of Jews who fortuitously left Jerusalem shortly before the Babylonian captivity in 587 B.C. and were providentially led to the New World by boat. Once in the western hemisphere, the refugees divided into factions fighting for political power, but their conflicts were fueled by theological and social differences. The book covers a thousand years, spanning the intertestamental period of the Judeo-Christian scriptures (c. 600 B.C.–A.D. 421). It speaks of complex social interactions, conversions, migrations, battles, and religious renewals. It blends the scriptures of the Jewish and Christian traditions to the point that readers are impressed by its pervasively Jewish yet fundamentally Christian outlook.

2. There is an ongoing debate and a profusion of stimulating scholarship on Book of Mormon origins. One side attributes the book’s origin to Joseph Smith’s antebellum American environment and his (or someone else’s) fertile mind. The other side draws comparisons between Book of Mormon features and the culture of the Ancient Near East and Mesoamerica. This fascinating discussion can be followed in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* and the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* published by The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS).

3. Steven C. Harper, “Mormon Missionaries in America’s Religious Marketplace: Proselyting in the 1830s,” *Journal of Mormon History* (Fall 1998): 4–28.

4. The first letter is V. Alan Curtis to George S. Brewer, 25 June 1974, Erie County Historical Society, Library Files. The second is George S. Brewer to V. Alan Curtis, 3 July 1974, in the same repository.

5. Cheryl Harmon Bean and Pamela Call Johnson, *Rediscovering History: Mormons in Erie County, Pennsylvania 1832–1833* (St. Anthony, Idaho: printed privately, 1995). This paper relies heavily on the material compiled by Bean and Johnson, whose work I discovered after working with the journals of Evan Greene and the other missionaries who proselytized Erie County residents.

6. *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Salt Lake City, 1981), hereafter cited as D&C. Many of these revelations were first published in 1833 as part of the *Book of Commandments*. The first edition of the D&C was published in 1835.

7. Jared Carter, Journal, 1831–32, Historical Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Unless otherwise noted, the journals and autobiographies cited are housed there.

8. Samuel H. Smith, Journal. V. Alan Curtis, "Missionary Activities and Church Organizations in Pennsylvania, 1830–1840," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976, 29. Less useful for study of Erie County but covering a longer period is Paul Zilch Rosenbaum, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Pennsylvania (1830–1854)," M.A. thesis, East Stroudsburg State College, 1982.

9. Orson Hyde, Journal, 15–21 February 1832.

10. *Ibid.*, 28–29 February 1832. D&C 20 is essentially the Law and Covenants that Hyde and Smith copied for Simons to use as a guide for the Erie County converts.

11. Carter Journal, 27 April–2 May 1832.

12. Smith, Hyde, Carter Journals.

13. Greene to Hartshorn and Haskins, 21 December 1832.

14. Greene Journal, 27 January 1833. Boynton became an Apostle in 1835 and then a dissenter and apostate in 1837 before a career as an inventor of Civil War torpedoes and other useful devices. He is listed in *The National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, 63 vols. (New York: James White, 1898–1984): 4:91–2.

15. *Ibid.*, 20 February 1832.

16. *Ibid.*, 2 February 1833.

17. Approximations based on dividing the number of converts in 1833 by the number of residents in the respective townships as listed on the 1830 census. Less than 1 percent of all county residents converted to Mormonism.

18. As shown by the 1830 census. For example, see Erie County, Springfield Township, 336.

19. Bean and Johnson, "Rediscovering History," 39–78.

20. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 90. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 316.

21. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 20.

22. See Amasa Lyman, "Autobiography," *Millennial Star* 27 (1865). Orson Hyde, "Autobiography," *Millennial Star* 26 (1864), 776; Benjamin Johnson, "My Life's Review," Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 78–9. Other missionaries known to have been in Erie County at one time or another include Gideon Carter, Jared's brother, William Smith, another younger brother of Joseph, Eden Smith, unrelated, and Philastus Hurlbut, who shortly thereafter dissented from Mormonism and became an antagonist of Joseph Smith.

23. D&C 28:2; 107:91. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 11.

24. Daniel Tyler, "Incidents of Experience," *Juvenile Instructor* (1883): 27.

25. It was common for Mormon converts to keep a diary and then later in life rely on it to write an autobiography. Levi Jackman's journal and autobiography are good examples. They are housed at Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library, Archives.

26. Tyler, 23.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 24–5.

29. *Ibid.*, 25–6.

30. *Ibid.*, 22. The larger point is developed by Nathan Hatch in *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), esp. chapter 6, "The Right to Think for Oneself," 162–89.

31. Tyler, 22–3.

32. *Ibid.*, 24.

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33. Daniel Tyler, "Recollections," *Juvenile Instructor* 27 (1892), 93.
34. Tyler, "Incidents of Experience," 26–7.
35. Jan Shippis, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 3.
36. David Brion Davis, "The New England Origins of Mormonism," *New England Quarterly* (June 1953): 157–58.
37. Greene, Journal, 3 May 1832.
38. Mario S. DePillis, "The Social Sources of Mormonism," *Church History* 38 (1968): 54, 64, 76–7.
39. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 218. I reached the same conclusion independently in "By No Means Men of Weak Minds': The Gullible Bumpkin Thesis and the First Mormons," *Nauvoo Journal* (Fall 1995). Stark is referring to Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
40. Stark, 218.
41. Based on the assessments of the thirteen men who became converts or whose wives became converts. Erie County tax assessments, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, microfilm numbers 5694, 5702, 5713, 5717, 5721, 5722. Elk Creek tax assessments are not available for the period.
42. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 6. R. Lawrence Moore and Gordon Wood also argue that Mormonism attracted converts because it was simultaneously "revelatory and empirical." Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61 (October 1980): 380. Moore, *In Search of White Crows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 50.
43. For analysis and discussion of early Mormon conversion accounts, see Steven C. Harper, "'Infallible Proofs Both Human and Divine': The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts," forthcoming in *Religion and American Culture* 10:1 (Winter 2000).
44. Eli Gilbert to Editor, *Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio), October 1834, 10.
45. Richard L. Bushman, "The Visionary World of Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 37:1 (1997–98): quote is from 185; the larger point is developed throughout.
46. For instance, D&C 29, 42, 57.
47. *History of Erie County, Pennsylvania*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Warner, Beers, 1884), 160–61. The Rudds converted in 1832.
48. Bean and Johnson, "Rediscovering History." John R. Claridge, *Lost Erie: The Vanished Heritage of City and County* (Erie: Erie County Historical Society, 1991).
49. Levi Jackman, Autobiography, typescript, Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.