

“Come & Help Build the Temple & City”: Parley P. and Orson Pratt’s May 1843 Letter to John Van Cott

Brian M. Hauglid

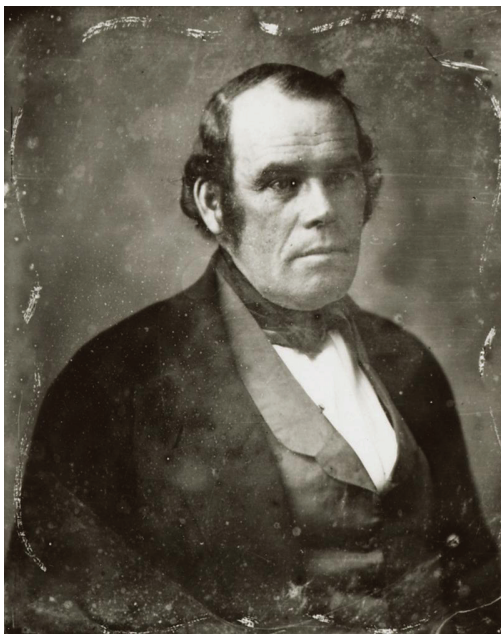
In early February 1843, LDS Apostle Parley P. Pratt returned to Illinois following a three-and-a-half-year mission to Great Britain. Upon his return to Nauvoo he noted: “I was astonished to see so large a city all created during my absence, and felt to rejoice.”¹ On May 7, 1843, three months after his return, Parley communicated by letter with his cousin John Van Cott in Canaan, New York. At the end of the letter, Orson Pratt, Parley’s younger brother and fellow member of the Twelve, penned a few informative lines of his own. Several items in the letter provide a glimpse into the both Parley and Orson’s state of mind, and provide some context to certain events that had been taking place recently in Nauvoo. The Pratt brother’s primary purpose in writing appears to be to review a few of the newsworthy items regarding events that had recently transpired in Nauvoo, and to invite Van Cott, who had been investigating the Church, to come to Illinois, join the Church, receive the saving ordinances, and help build the city and the temple.

The Kinderhook Plates

After providing Van Cott with the most recent happenings and health status of his family, P. Pratt briefly discusses the discovery of six bell-shaped

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Daguerreotype of Parley P. Pratt, 1850, Marsena Cannon Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.



plates engraved upon with strange characters on both sides, which were unearthed in Kinderhook, Illinois. Two weeks earlier, the plates had been taken to Nauvoo and presented to Joseph Smith for “examination & translation.” In the Prophet’s manuscript history, dated May 1, 1843, William Clayton wrote on behalf of Smith: “I have translated a portion of them, and find they contain the history of the person with whom they were found. He was a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and that he received his kingdom from the Ruler of heaven and earth.”² In his letter, Parley identified the engravings as “Egyptian,” containing a genealogy of a descendant of the Jaredites back to Ham and Noah. He also notes that the characters on the Kinderhook plates were comparable to the characters on the Egyptian papyri.³

Although the plates have been proven a forgery, questions still remain about whether Joseph Smith actually attempted to translate them.⁴ This letter, in conjunction with Clayton’s entry, suggests that Smith likely did view the plates as an ancient text and at least attempted some translation. However, no document has provided evidence that Smith looked upon these plates in any way other than as an academic endeavor.⁵ P. Pratt is the only one to refer to the language of the plates as “Egyptian.” How he arrived at this notion is unknown, but his letter also includes a number of other details that seem to differ from Clayton’s account. For example, P. Pratt heard that the discovery

took place in Pike County, while Clayton says Adam County. P. Pratt heard the find was fifteen feet underground, while Clayton says six feet. P. Pratt heard the plates contain the history of a descendant of Jaredites, while Clayton says it gives the history of an Egyptian. P. Pratt mentions a cement vase, which is unique to his account, while Clayton says there was a nine-foot skeleton unearthed, which is unique to his account.⁶ These differences suggest that the rumor mill in Nauvoo was probably in full gear at the time of P. Pratt's writing. Clayton's account may be more accurate in a few of its details because of his firsthand involvement with the situation and particularly with Joseph Smith. But P. Pratt's account reflects the enthusiasm concerning the Kinderhook plates in 1843 Nauvoo and also offers other interesting details, such as the comparison of characters with the Egyptian papyri.

John C. Bennett and the Pratt Brothers

In his portion of the letter P. Pratt mentions that "Bro. Orson Pratt is in the church and always has been & has the confidence of Joseph Smith and all good men who know him." This statement probably refers to an incident regarding John C. Bennett, Orson, and Orson's wife, Sarah M. Pratt. For a time, John C. Bennett had been a close friend and confidant of Joseph Smith, but he was excommunicated and estranged from the Church in June 1842 for illicit

Orson Pratt, ca. 1875–1883. Charles R. Savage photograph, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.



and immoral conduct. Following his separation from Mormonism, Bennett accused Joseph Smith of seducing other men's wives and, in this case, Orson Pratt's wife, Sarah. For a time Orson Pratt believed Bennett and his stories, causing a temporary rift between him (Orson) and Joseph Smith. In August 1842, the Quorum of the Twelve held a council and severed O. Pratt from the Quorum, but not the Church. However, by January 1843 (four months prior to the letter), he had reconciled with the Twelve, mended his relationship with the Prophet, and was reinstated to his place in the Quorum.⁷ Parley's sentiment that Orson "is in the church and always has been" may be related to Joseph Smith's argument that there was not a quorum when Orson Pratt's case was heard and that "he had not been legally cut off."⁸

Following his excommunication, John C. Bennett published the controversial *History of the Saints, or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, which was highly critical of Joseph Smith and the Church, and he had already begun spreading its influence, a fact that infuriated both Pratt brothers. P. Pratt does not hold back his intense hatred of the work: "As to Bennett or his book I consider it a little stooping to mention it. It is beneath contempt & would disgrace the society of hell & the Devil." O. Pratt also vents: "J. C. Bennett has published lies concerning myself & family & the people with which I am connected. His book I have read with the greatest disgust no candid honest man can or will believe it." Although both Pratts mention Bennett's book, it is noteworthy that P. Pratt emphasized Bennett's name as barely mentioned among the Saints of 1843 Nauvoo "except with a perfect disgust." The letter thus provides an epilogue of sorts to the whole Bennett fiasco.

Other Matters

P. Pratt's letter briefly mentions a few other matters that provide additional glimpses into 1843 Nauvoo, noting that two of the Book of Mormon witnesses (namely Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer) had left the Church but "never denied their testimony." Surely the loss of these witnesses would have been a subject of interest to the Saints. P. Pratt expressed a sentiment likely shared by many at that time in hoping "that they would be restored again" to the faith. He also says that Martin Harris is "still in the church," although this would be in principle only, since he had not been rebaptized.⁹

Although the atmosphere in the spring of 1843 was much more peaceful than in the previous year, P. Pratt emphatically defends Joseph Smith as a good man in his various capacities, compares him to Joseph of Egypt, and even adds that Smith had been a "good enemy" to his critics. In this letter, P. Pratt appears as converted as ever to the restoration of the gospel, priesthood, temple blessings, and all the promised eternal blessings. He forcefully and el-

John Van Cott, ca. 1846. Photograph courtesy Carol Larson.



egantly declares that “there is such an expanse of glory & intelligence before me when I touch this subject that I would want an age to express a small part of it.”

This letter is clearly a response to a letter received by P. Pratt from John Van Cott. For instance, Van Cott must have expressed interest in receiving issues of the *Times and Seasons* newspaper, since he sent two dollars to P. Pratt to pay for a subscription. He is also most likely the prompt for P. Pratt’s comments on the three witnesses, Orson’s status, Bennett’s book, Joseph Smith, and even baptism for the dead, which Pratt defers to another time. Even so, P. Pratt’s response provides a snapshot of Nauvoo in May 1843, in which spring is blooming, the people are in “good spirits,” and the Pratts are doing well. Finally, this letter shows both Parley’s and Orson’s depth of commitment to the restoration, their willingness to preach the gospel, their affection for their cousin, and their sincere desire that Van Cott be counted among the Saints in Nauvoo.

Significantly, John Van Cott (1814–1883) responded positively to the Pratt’s invitation. He moved to Nauvoo and was baptized in September 1845. He was ordained a Seventy in 1847, presided over the Scandinavian Mission twice, and was later chosen as one of the seven presidents of Seventy.¹⁰

Nauvoo May 7th 1843

Dear Cousins

I recd. your letter about a month since, on arriving with my family in Nauvoo. It was a good letter and pleased me much. I gave the ^{two} dollars to the office of the Times &c. and ordered them forwarded immediately to you. I then thought I would immediately answer yours but although it may seem strange to you I have not seen a hour which it was in my power to devote to that purpose till now on account of business, building, visiting and receiving company &c. and the unsettled state of my large family (consisting of wife & her sister, 5 children hired girl, & hundreds of gains & comers) all cruddled into one small room which we use for kitchen parlour, diningroom, bedroom & business office. You will therefore excuse delay and accept of this short & imperfect communication. First, then, we are all well except our babe of one month old which has the whooping-cough. The spring though late is opening freely & vegetation is beginning to revive & with it our temple & town are recommencing their rapid growth. We had a fine display of the Legion yesterday, in general parade, the first I have witnessed. I was highly delighted. We are all in good spirits as a people & rapidly increasing in numbers I have no father news except that six tablets having the appearance of Boas have lately been dug out of a mound by a gentleman in Pike Co. Illinois, they are small and filled with engravings in Egyptian language and contain the genealogy of one of the ancient Jaredites back to Ham the son of Noah his bones were found in the same case (made of Cement) part of the bones had crumbled to dust & the other part were ~~part~~ preserved the bones were 15 ft. under ground. The gentlemen who found them were unconnected with this church but have brought them to Joseph Smith for examination & translation a large number of Citizens here have seen them and compared the characters with those on the Egyptian papyrus which is now in this city. I have no time for particulars but you will

Parley P. Pratt and Orson Pratt to John Van Cott, May 7, 1843, page 1. Image courtesy Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Document

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Bro. Orson Pratt is in the church and always has been / & has the confidence of Joseph Smith and all good men / who know him. I expect that he with several others of the twelve / will go a mission from here to the east this summer as / far as New York & Boston.¹⁷ Orson perhaps will call / on you. As to Bennett or his book I consider it a little / stooping to mention it. It is beneath contempt & would / disgrace the society of hell & the Devil. But it will / ¹⁸answer the end of its creation viz: to delude those who / have rejected that pure & glorious record the book of / Mormon. There is not such a thing named among the / saints here as he represents. & his book or name is / scarcely mentioned. & never except with a perfect disgust / his object was vengeance on those who exposed his iniquity/

Br. Joseph Smith is a faithful man, a good citizen, / a good general, a good Mayor, a good prophet, a good / neighbor, a good friend & I like to have said a good / enemy, he has the universal esteem not only of the church / but of nearly all who know him. In short he is like / Joseph of old who was sold into Egypt, at first envied / for his visions & dreams & cast into prison, but at length / delivered and ex{t|}alted for the salvation of Israel & / the world. You say that religious excitement / is general in town¹⁹ & country & inquire²⁰ where it will / end? I will tell you. It will end when

the wheat / is gathered²¹ into the barn and the Tares left over the / field in bundles and finally Bound. Who knows but the / Creeds of Christendom are the Tare bands & the various / sects the bundles? If you know tell me!! As to Bap- / tism for the dead I have neither room nor time [p. 2] to tell you at this time. You must come up {the|to} the / mountain of the Lord's house & be taught in his / ways & walk in his paths before you can know all. / But suffice to say that the gospel & priesthood / after the order of the Son of God is the same in time / & in eternity, in this life & that which is to come. / There is no other way to be saved but through the / ministration of the gospel, Priest- hood & ordinances / These are committed with the keys of knowledge & / salvation in heaven & on earth, and all who do not / have the gospel in this world <will> in the next. But there / is such an expanse of glory & intelligence before me / when I touch this subject that I would want an / age to express a small part of it. I must forbear.²² /

Dear Cousin & friends it is sunday afternoon & / my house has been several times filled & emt{y|i}ed of old / acquaintance and others who call to see us, & it is now / full again and what with how do ye dos, goodbys, & / shaking hands & conversation, I have made but a blund- / ering business & must now close. Myself, family, Br. / Orson & family and bro. Wm²³ & family are <all> well & living n[ear] each other; Mother²⁴ is here with us & is / well [◇]an & family will be here soon. I wish / the rest of my kindred would gather here. Come /John & build here & inhabit. Come & help build / the Temple & City. I am now building a two story / store & dwelling house 32 ft. by 56 near the Temple²⁵ / I hope to complete it in three months & then I / am ready for another mission. My love to all / kindred & friends write soon. Yours &c.

P. P. Pratt.

Dear Cousin:-

This sheet not being quite full I take / the liberty of addressing a few lines to you. I am / truly glad you have examined for yourself / [p. 3] the doctrine of our church & have independantly expressed / your views upon the ancient order of things. If you continue / your investigations I am certain that you cannot but be / fully convinced of the divine authenticity of the great / and glorious principles beleived by the church of / Latter Day Saints. We have been a persecuted people from / the beginning but the Lord has been our strength. J. C. / Bennett has published lies concerning myself & family & the / people with which I am connected. His book I have read / with the greatest disgust No candid honest man can or / will believe it. He has disgraced him- self in eyes of all / civilized society who will dispise his very name. / I must now close by subscribing myself your Cousin

Orson Pratt.

May 10 [Nauvoo postage seal]

Mr. John Van Cott, 25²⁶

Canaan 4 Corners

Columbia Co.

New York.

Myself & family consisting of wife & two children are well / I expect to pass through Philadelphia New York Boston / and other places in the east during the season & should / be much pleased to visit you if the Lord will. Write often. & come / & see us. I sent to you a paper & pamphlet a short time since. Orson Pratt.

Notes

1. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1975), 328.

2. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:372.

3. In an article appearing in the *New York Herald*, May 30, 1843, the author (who identified himself simply as “Gentile”) indicated that the Kinderhook plates were compared with the “Egyptian Alphabet,” probably referring to the document known as the “Grammar and Alphabet [*sic*] of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL), compiled and written by W. W. Phelps and Warren Parrish in Kirtland in 1835. In a presentation titled “Joseph Smith’s Translation from the Kinderhook Plates: A Historical Mystery,” given at the Thirteenth Annual Mormon Apologetics Conference of FAIR (Foundation for Apologetic Research and Information) on August 5, 2011, Don Bradley presented evidence that a character on the Kinderhook plates resembles one found on page 4 of the GAEL. The description of the character also corresponds closely to Clayton’s description. Bradley argues that the use of the GAEL indicates that Joseph Smith took a secular interest in the plates rather than a revelatory one. I have also come to the same conclusion in a forthcoming article titled “Did Joseph Smith Translate the Kinderhook Plates?” in Robert L. Millett, ed., *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2011).

4. See Stanley B. Kimball, “Kinderhook Plates Brought to Joseph Smith Appear to be a Nineteenth-Century Hoax,” *Ensign* 11, no. 8 (August 1981): 66–74.

5. Joseph Smith’s interest in the ancient world and ancient languages, particularly Hebrew, support the notion that he was interested in other aspects of antiquity, specifically languages, from a secular perspective. See note 3 above.

6. Kimball, “Kinderhook Plates,” 73.

7. For a fuller account of the 1842 Nauvoo debacle regarding Orson Pratt, see Gary A. Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Book, 2002), 7–51. See also Richard S. Van Wagoner, “Sarah Pratt: The Shaping of an Apostate,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 69–99.

8. Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve, January 20, 1843, as cited in Van Wagoner, “Sarah Pratt,” 80.

9. Due to disagreements, hardships, and conflicts during the late 1830s, all three witnesses were excommunicated from the Church—Martin Harris in December 1837, and Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer in April 1838. Following his excommunication, Harris remained in Kirtland and associated with the Church for a few years, then affiliated with various Restoration groups for nearly three decades. He finally came to Utah in 1870, where he was rebaptized on September 17 of that year. See Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, ““Rest Assured, Martin Harris Will be Here in Time,”” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 1 (2011): 5–27. See also Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1989).

10. See Andrew Jenson, *Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:198–99.

11. *The Times and Seasons*, published in Nauvoo from 1839–1846.

12. The Nauvoo Legion was an independent city militia company, officially organized in February 1841 in compliance with the Nauvoo charter, with Joseph Smith as lieutenant

general. Both Parley and Orson became assistant chaplains in the Legion. See Richard E. Bennett, Susan Easton Black, and Donald Q. Cannon, *The Nauvoo Legion in Illinois: A History of the Mormon Militia, 1841–1846* (Norman, OK: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2010), 370. See also Hamilton Gardner, “Nauvoo Legion, 1840–1845: A Unique Military Organization,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 54 (Summer 1961): 181–97.

13. Or “farther.”

14. See “Ancient Records,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 12 (May 1, 1843): 185–87. The article contained information from the *Quincy Whig* which reported the discovery took place April 23, 1843. The report also stated that Robert Wiley professed having the same dream three nights in succession directing him to the mound that contained the plates. He enlisted the help of about eight others who witnessed the excavation.

15. Or “gentleman.”

16. One or both “l”s in “will” look crossed, but for the sentence to make sense it should be read “will” and not “witt” or “with.”

17. Beginning in July 1843, both Parley and Orson along with other members of the Twelve served missions in the East. Orson returned in October, Parley by November.

18. This line has faded due to folding but is still readable.

19. Initial letter “t” in “town” is obscured.

20. Or “enquire.”

21. Underlined three times.

22. End of line partially obscured through folding.

23. William D. Pratt, older brother of Parley and Orson Pratt.

24. Charity Dickinson Pratt married Jared Pratt on July 7, 1799. They were the parents of five sons: Anson, William D., Parley P., Orson, and Nelson E. Pratt. Her husband died on November 5, 1839. She married Cornelius P. Lott on January 22, 1846, in Nauvoo, Illinois. She died on May 20, 1849, in St. Joseph, Missouri.

25. The home was located on the southeast corner of Young and Wells Streets, one block north of the Nauvoo Temple.

26. “25” written in different ink.