

Note: Footnotes 1, 21-22 were omitted during printing.

The Palmyra Revival of 1824-25, From Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist Records: Its Impact on the Restoration Movement

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Introduction

Shortly after the Joseph Smith Sr. family reunited in the town of Palmyra, New York, the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra was incorporated in March 1817.¹ The family eventually made arrangements to purchase about one hundred acres in Farmington (later named Burt and Manchester). The oldest son of the family, 25-year-old Alvin, worked with Russell Stoddard in building a frame home for his parents, brothers, and sisters. Soon thereafter, Alvin died unexpectedly.

The Smith family held Christian beliefs and used the Bible in their religious teachings at home. Joseph Sr. had visionary experiences and avoided organized religion. The elder Smith also believed in treasures buried supernaturally in the earth that could be obtained only through magic rituals.

Palmyra Revival

In Lucy Mack Smith's draft of her history, she relates the family's sorrow after Alvin's death in November 1823. She said, "we could not be comforted because he was not;" she adds a short statement, subsequently crossed out: "[a]bout this time their [sic] was a great revival in religion and the whole neighborhood was very much aroused to the subject and we among the rest flocked to the meeting house to see if their [sic] was a word of comfort for us that might relieve [sic] our over charged feelings."² Her history continues:

¹Incorporation papers of the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, March 18, 1817, in Miscellaneous Records, Book C:209, Ontario County Clerk's Office, Canandaigua, NY.

²Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844-1845, book 4, Church History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT; Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 356-57, words above the line included in brackets. Another portion crossed out included: "[t]he circumstance of this Death aroused the neighborhood to the subject of religion" (355).

[t]here was <at this time> a man then laboring in that place to effect a union of all the churches that all denominations might be agreed to worship God with one mind and one heart This I thought looked right and tried to persuade My Husband to join with them as I wished to do so myself and it was the inclination of them all [her children] except Joseph he refused from the first to attend the meeting with us He would say Mother I do not wish to prevent you from going to meeting or joining any church you like or any of the Family who desire the like only do not ask me to go <do so> for I do not wish to go But I will take my Bible and go out into the woods and learn more in two hours than you could if you were to go to meeting two years.

While no date is given in her recollection, Lucy Smith placed the “union of all the churches” after Alvin’s death. There were a number of churches holding services in the Palmyra area, *viz.*, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Quaker. While the Methodists held camp meetings in the general area of Palmyra, there had been a revival among the Presbyterians during the earlier winter of 1816-17.

Except for the local Baptist Church of Palmyra, there are no known lists of members who joined other churches during the Palmyra revival and excitement of 1824-25. The revival that impacted Palmyra and other towns was but a small part of the Great Awakening in western New York. What follows is a reconstruction of the Palmyra revival among Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists.

First Methodist Episcopal Church of Palmyra

The membership records of the Methodist Church are not available as they were reported as having been destroyed in a fire at Rochester, New York in 1933. Palmyra was on the Ontario circuit within the Ontario district. The local Palmyra newspaper of September 15, 1824 showed the progress of the work of the Methodist Church:

A reformation is going on in this town to a great extent. The love of God has been shed abroad in the hearts of many, and the outpouring of the Spirit seems to have taken a strong hold. About twenty-five have recently obtained a hope in the Lord, and joined the Methodist Church, and many more are desirous of becoming members.³

In January 1825 a report by Rev. George Lane, presiding elder of the Ontario district, was published in the *Methodist Magazine* of April 1825 concerning the Lord's work in Palmyra and vicinity. It "commenced in the spring, and progressed moderately until the time of the quarterly meeting, which was held on the 25th and 26th of September" 1824. Rev. Lane wrote:

³“Communication,” dated “Palmyra, 11th Sept. 1824,” *Wayne Sentinel* 1 (September 15, 1824):3, Palmyra, NY.

[f]rom Catharine [circuit] I went to Ontario circuit, where the Lord had already begun a gracious work in Palmyra...About this time [September 25 and 26, 1824] it appeared to break out afresh. Monday evening, after the quarterly meeting, there were four converted, and on the following evening, at a prayer meeting at Dr. Chase's, there were seven. Among these was a young woman by the name of Lucy Stoddard.⁴

(Nineteen-year-old Lucy Stoddard was a cousin of Calvin Stoddard, who would later marry Joseph Smith Jr.'s sister Sophronia.)⁵

Also of contemporary interest was a claim by Joseph Smith Sr. to have heard a rumor that his deceased son Alvin's grave had been disturbed. On September 25, along with some neighbors, he dug up the body of Alvin and found the rumor to be incorrect.⁶ Lane further reported:

December 11th and 12th our quarterly meeting for Ontario circuit was held in Ontario...Here I found that the work which had for some time been going on in Palmyra, had broken out from the village like a mighty flame, and was spreading in every direction. When I left the place, December 22[n]d, there had, in the village and its vicinity, upward of one hundred and fifty joined the [Methodist] society, besides a number that had joined other churches, and many that had joined no church.⁷

By February 1825, revivals were reported in the neighboring towns of Williamson and Ontario to the north; in Manchester, Sulphur Springs, and Vienna to the southeast; in Lyons to the east; and in Macedon to the west. Even towns at a greater distance from Palmyra began to experience revival fires, with Mendon to the west and Geneva to the southeast sharing in the evangelical outpouring.

Methodist records give the total membership of the preaching points serviced by a circuit-riding preacher. The increase of 208 reported in the summer of 1825 for the previous year demonstrates that this was a banner year for the Ontario circuit on which Palmyra was located.⁸

⁴"Revival of Religion on Ontario District," letter of George Lane, January 25, 1825, in *The Methodist Magazine, Designed as a Compend of Useful Knowledge, and of Religious and Missionary Intelligence, for the Year of our Lord 1825*, vol. VIII (New York: Published by N. Bangs and J. Emory, 1825), 8 (April 1825):158-59.

⁵Calvin W. Stoddard was baptized on April 3, 1825 (Minutes of the Palmyra Baptist Church, April 3, 1825). Stoddard married Sophronia Smith, who was then a member of the Palmyra Presbyterian Church, on December 30, 1827.

⁶"To the Public," *Wayne Sentinel* 2 (September 29, 1824):3, also in issues of October 6, 13, 20, 27 and November 3, 1824.

⁷*Methodist Magazine* 8 (April 1825):160.

⁸*Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1773-1828*, vol. 1 (New-York: Published by T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), the report of Ontario district in the Ontario Conference for 1824 was 417 white, 4 color (446) and the membership figure for 1825 was 627 white 2 color (471). (1825).

Palmyra Presbyterian Church

The first volume of the Palmyra Presbyterian Church's minutes has been missing since at least 1898. But the records of the Geneva Presbytery, to which the local church belonged, are still extant, and these clearly reflect the revival in the Palmyra congregation. The minutes show that by September 21, 1825, when figures were in for a revival over the winter of 1824-25, "99 have been admitted on examination." As early as February 1825, the Presbytery was called on to:

bless the Lord for the displays of sovereign grace which have been made <within our boundaries> during the past year. In the congregation of Palmyra, the Lord has appeared in his glory to build up Zion. More than a hundred have been hopefully brought into the kingdom of the Redeemer. The distinguishing doctrines of grace have proved eminently the sword of the Spirit, by which the rebellion of man's heart has been slain. The fruits of holiness in this revival even now are conspicuous. The exertions for the promotion of divine knowledge are greater than formerly. Sabbath Schools, Bible classes, Missionary & Tract Societies are receiving unusual attention, & their salutary influence is apparent.⁹

The *Religious Advocate*, a Presbyterian publication printed in Rochester, was cited in the March 2, 1825 issue of the *Wayne Sentinel*:

a revival of religion had taken place in the town[s] of Palmyra, Macedon, Manchester, Phelps, Lyons and Ontario, and that more than 200 souls had become hopeful subjects of Divine Grace, &c. It may be added, that in Palmyra and Macedon, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist Churches, more than 400 have already testified that the Lord is good. The work is still progressing.¹⁰

James Hotchkin wrote, "a copious shower of grace passed over this region in 1824, under the labors of Mr. Stockton, and a large number were gathered into the church, some of whom are now pillars in Christ's house."¹¹

⁹Geneva Presbytery "Records," September 21, 1825, Book D:40; Geneva Synod "Records," October. 6, 1825, 431, both in the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA. In the Presbytery's Report to Synod, the Palmyra church reported for the year between September 10, 1824, and September 23, 1825, additions of 103 members and a membership jump from seventy-nine to 178 members (130% increase) with forty adult baptisms. See "Presbyterial Reports to the Synod of Geneva," Presbyterian Historical Society. For the quotation, see Geneva Presbytery "Records," February 2, 1825, Book D:27-28.

¹⁰"Religious," *Wayne Sentinel* 2 (March 2, 1825):3, see also p4.

¹¹James H. Hotchkin, *A History of the Purchase and Settlement of Western New York and of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Presbyterian Church in that Section* (New York: Published by M. W. Dodd, 1848), 378.

Palmyra Baptist Church Records

Membership rolls of "the first Baptized [sic] Church in Palmyra," which had a frame meetinghouse west of the village of Palmyra in Macedon Township, includes the names of those added to the membership record. The awakening began on October 20, 1824, when church minutes show that:

Michael Egleston, Erastus Spear, Lorenzo Spear, Abigail Spear, Belena Byxbe, Minerva Titus, Sophia Rogers, and Harriot Rogers told their Christian experience to the Church and were fellowshipped by the Church and on Thursday following were Baptized by Elder Bradley and Received into the Church.

The minutes of November 20 mention eight more individuals baptized; the November 25-26 minutes name an additional twelve. In December 19 more were added by conversion. In the first four months of 1825, there were 44 additional baptisms. During the months of May-August, there were only three baptized. For the period from October 1824 to August 1825, a total of 94 persons were received on profession of faith and baptized, and an additional 14 were added by letter. The local membership of the church was 132 in 1824 and had grown to 219 by 1825, an increase of 87 over the one-year conference period.¹² This 1824-25 revival received write-ups in a number of publications.¹³

Abraham Spear wrote:

<in 1824> A Powerful work of the Holy Spirit took place on the hearts of the impenitent, Saints rejoiced and Sinners trembled Several hundred professed to have passed from death to life and out of the number who professed to have obtained a hope in Christ 118 [sic; 108] were added to the Baptist Church under the ministry of James C Barret and Baruch Beckwith."¹⁴

¹²"A Book of Records for the First Baptized [sic] Church in Palmyra" (1813-1859), includes minutes for October 16; November 20, 24; December 4, 5, 18, 1824; January 1, 15, 29; February 19; March 5, 19; and April 3, 1825. Original Palmyra Baptist records, American Baptist Historical Society, Atlanta, GA. See also *Minutes of the Ontario Baptist Association, Convened at Penfield, on the 28th and 29th of September 1825* (Rochester: Printed by Everard Peck, 1825), 5.

¹³For example, *New-York Religious Chronicle* 2 (November 20, 1824): 154; 3 (April 9, 1825): 58; *Western New York Baptist Magazine* 4 (February 1825): 284; *Western Recorder* 1 (November 9, 1824): 90; 2 (March 29, 1825): 50; *Boston Recorder* 10 (April 29, 1825): 70; 10 (May 20, 1825): 82; *Baptist Register* (Utica), December 3, 1824; March 11, 1825, 7; *American Baptist*, February 1825; *Zion's Herald* 3 (February 9, May 11, 1825), a Methodist weekly in Boston; *American Baptist Magazine* 5 (April 1825):124-25; and the *New York Observer*, May 7, 1825.

¹⁴"A brief History of the <Rise and Progress of the> Baptist Church Formerly Palmyra Now Macedon Wayne Co. and state of New York," 3, reproduced in *First Baptist Church of Macedon, A History of the First Two Hundred Years 1800-2000* (n.p.: Bicentennial Committee of the Church, 2001), 14.

Moving the Palmyra Revival

The first Latter Day Saint publication regarding the Palmyra revival appeared in the letters of Oliver Cowdery during 1834-35 at which time changes in the chronology were being made for theological and financial purposes. This included changing the name of the church, altering the designated site where it had been organized, and revising the text for about a third of the recorded revelations that Joseph Smith had proclaimed. Emphasis was now being placed on priesthood restoration and the establishment of a firm foundation toward a retrospective view of a New Testament church. Altering those original revelatory messages would also permit a revised story of the events in the early life of Joseph Smith Jr.¹⁵

Oliver Cowdery, evidently obtaining his information from Joseph himself, wrote about “a great awaking [sic],” and Methodist elder George Lane, who had visited the Palmyra area. But rather than placing the ministry into the latter part of 1824 as Lane had done, Cowdery’s 1834 letter placed it into 1820 or 1821:

I shall, therefore, pass over that, till I come to the 15th year of his life. It is necessary to premise this account by relating the situation of the public mind relative to religion, at this time: One Mr. Lane, a presiding Elder of the Methodist church, visited Palmyra, and vicinity. Elder Lane was a tallented [sic] man possessing a good share of literary endowments, and apparent humility. There was a great awakening, or excitement raised on the subject of religion, and much enquiry for the word of life. Large additions were made to the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches.—Mr. Lane’s manner of communication was peculiarly calculated to awaken the intellect of the hearer, and arouse the sinner to look about him for safety—much good instruction was always drawn from his discourses on the scriptures, and in common with others, our brother’s mind became awakened...In this general strife for followers, his mother, one sister, and two of his natural brothers, were persuaded to unite with the Presbyterians.¹⁶

Cowdery wrote that Joseph’s mother united with the Presbyterians, paralleling the event cited in Lucy Smith’s own history about joining a church. In his following letter, printed in February 1835, Cowdery made what he terms a correction “in the type” of the excitement in Palmyra as having occurred in 1823, off by one year but still at variance with the earlier 1820-21 date portrayed in his December letter:

You will recollect that I mentioned the time of a religious excitement, in Palmyra and vicinity to have been in the 15th year of our brother J. Smith Jr’s, age—that was an error in the type—it should have been in the 17th.—You will please remember this correction

¹⁵H. Michael Marquardt, "Changing Revelatory Messages: A Mormon Example," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 33 (Spring/Summer 2013):122-39.

¹⁶“Letter III. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1 (December 1834):42, Kirtland, OH.

as it will be necessary for the full understanding of what will follow in time. This would bring the date down to the year 1823.¹⁷

It is not known why this change was made, but Cowdery's new claim would now bring new focus to the evening of September 21, 1823, almost two months before Alvin's death.

Names of Smith Family Members Who Joined the Palmyra Presbyterian Church

In 1838 and the following year, a further account by Smith himself placed the revival to an even earlier time period with an expanding emphasis on theology, mentioning by name members of the Smith family who joined the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra. The following is an extract relating to the excitement:

Sometime in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division among the people, Some crying, "Lo here" and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist...I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My Fathers family was proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy, My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Soph[r]onia...I attended their several meetings as occasion would permit. But in [the] process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect¹⁸

The fact that the names of Joseph's mother and brothers appear later as members of the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra (later dropped for nonattendance) is further evidence that the revival Smith had in view involved the local Presbyterian Church.¹⁹ Joseph would have been a man of eighteen years in 1824.

Prior to the time of the Palmyra revival, Orsamus Turner noted Joseph's presence at a Methodist camp meeting and found him "a very passable exhorter."²⁰ Smith also attended the

¹⁷"Letter IV. To W. W. Phelps, Esq.," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1 (February 1835):78.

¹⁸Manuscript History, Book A-1: 1-2, Church History Library; Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark-Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832-1844* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 208. First printed in "History of Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3 (March 15, 1842):727, Nauvoo, IL.

¹⁹"Records of the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Palmyra," 2:11-13, original located at the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, Palmyra, NY.

²⁰O[rsamus]. Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase* (Rochester: Published by William Alling, 1851), 214.

local Methodist class in which members were to "bear one another's burdens." But since "there was no prerequisite for Methodist membership other than a desire for salvation, the societies were open to all, regardless of their spiritual state."²¹ In his earlier 1832 history, Smith had never included the background of a revival in his religious quest, though he did mention his "intimate acquaintance with those differant [sic] denominations."²²

In his climactic 1838-39 history, Smith reported primarily about the discord rather than any harmony among the three Christian churches and affirmed the religious excitement having occurred by 1820. This latest account, written during a time of persecution, was specifically tailored to be faith-oriented in the telling. Smith did not join any of the local churches in this account, "having been forbidden to join any of the religious sects of the day." A visionary experience and the Palmyra revival were two separate events. Placing the revival years earlier created a forewarning episode in Smith's theological quest to explain, in part, why he would not join a church.

Conclusion

The records of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches have dates relating to the revival in Palmyra and surrounding towns occurring during 1824-25. Oliver Cowdery and the Joseph Smith history both claim an earlier background event to clarify Smith's religious development. Churches of the Restoration Movement that refer to the revival usually cite the 1820 date reported in the 1838-1839 account (first published later in the *Times and Seasons*).

The placing of the Palmyra revival before a vision makes this a theological history portraying a religious experience. Topics include such matters as confusion over which church to join and persecution for telling about a vision. Although historians cannot provide evidence for a religious claim, they can indeed tell if such an event fits the historical context. By reinterpreting and moving the historical Palmyra revival mentioned by Lucy Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and Joseph Smith to dates before Alvin Smith's death creates a distinct historical problem.

Joseph Smith's description of his personal history has significance to those in the Restoration movement. His story explains what he regarded as important being a religious leader. A prophet need not be a historian.

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²¹For background on the Methodist Class, see David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987), 94, 108.

²²Davidson, et al., *Histories, Volume 1*:11-12.

FIGURE I: *Timeline of the Three Churches in the Palmyra Revival of 1824-25*

METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH	WESTERN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH	BAPTIST CHURCH
<i>Genesee Conference Ontario District Ontario Circuit</i>	<i>Geneva Synod Geneva Presbytery</i>	<i>Ontario Baptist Association</i>
Palmyra	West Palmyra	First Baptized Church in Palmyra
The work started in the spring of 1824		
Sept. 25-28: appeared to break out afresh		
		Oct. 20-21, 1824: awaking began; 8 baptized; Nov 20: 8 baptized; Nov. 25-26: 12 baptized; Dec.: 19 baptized
Dec. 11-12: broke out from The village like a mighty flame		Jan.-Apr. 1825: 44 baptized; May-Aug. 1825: 3 baptized;
208 increase in district (Minutes for 1825)	99 admitted on examination (Sept. 21, 1825)	94 baptized, 14 by letter; Total 108 added names in minutes and also on membership list (Sept. 28-29, 1825)
Palmyra: about 77 (by Jan. 1825)		
<i>Location of meeting house: on Vienna Street near the cemetery, 1822-?</i>	<i>Location of Union church: on Church Street near the cemetery, 1811-32</i>	<i>Location of meeting house: on Quaker Road near the cemetery, 1810-35 in Palmyra until 1823, then in Town of Macedon</i>

About 270 or more individuals joined the three churches during the revival.