
Counterfeiting in Early Mormonism: The Historical Record

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Introduction

THE EXTENT OF early Mormon participation in counterfeiting has long been a subject of debate among historians. Although most agree that the practice did occur in some measure, the scarcity of direct evidence and varying opinions about the underlying circumstances have continued to stifle agreement about the magnitude and effect it had on the movement and on the milieu roundabout. This paper is an attempt to compile some of the most reliable evidence for occurrences of counterfeiting among those associated with early Mormonism as well as the causes and motivations that accompanied it.

The Nature of Counterfeiting

Societies and governments have long determined the need for a sound medium of exchange. Whether in the form of metal or paper, money itself carries no fixed intrinsic value. A five-dollar bill is merely a printed piece of paper, and even a metal disc has negligible value *per se* unless all agree that it does. Only when a defined group agrees that various objects carry specific quantities of worth do they emerge as benefits to society. The system becomes destabilized when such objects in circulation are unauthorized. Counterfeiting is to the economy what poison is to food, and legal sanctions must be enforced to preserve the integrity of the monetary system.

In early America counterfeiting was a frequent problem. It was an attractive enterprise because the demand for currency and coins far exceeded the available supply. To alleviate the currency problem, some colonial-era governments issued notes from their own banks. But since these notes and bills of credit were easy to counterfeit, networks for bogus notes could proliferate, to the continual frustration of law enforcement. In fact, the problem was of such importance to the Founding Fathers that

they made it a federal concern by granting Congress the power to coin money in the U.S. Constitution, and “To provide for the Punishment of counterfeiting the Securities and current Coin of the United States” (Article I, Section 8).

Early counterfeiters typically worked in networks, as they could not be effective alone. Counterfeiting paper money (as opposed to coins), particularly required the coordination of different players: (1) someone to head up the operation (2) someone to obtain the engraving plates from banks or other engravers, (3) manufacturers who printed up the notes on a bogus press, (4) forgers who signed bank president’s names on notes, (5) distributors who delivered the counterfeit money to receivers in different locations, (6) buyers who received the counterfeit notes exchanging good money for bad, and (7) passers who palmed off the counterfeit notes to merchants, land owners, and others.

In the emerging society of the American frontier, such mischief became a special problem because of the inconstancy of the banking community, the lack of adequate law enforcement, and the relative scarcity of specie (the gold or silver that bank-notes represented).¹ Into this risky financial environment would enter the expanding Mormon movement in its westerly trajectory.

Underlying Origins of Mormon-era Counterfeiting

While it is generally accepted that some in the early Mormon community participated in counterfeiting, some have made reference to a peculiar correspondence of the practice with some of the unique features of the early religion itself. With respect to coinage, one such notion posits that the “occult” sphere of divining rods and seer stones ran parallel to that of the alchemist world of metaphysical metallurgy. That is, treasure-divining appeared so analogous to morphing lead into gold that one who practiced the former could easily be found doing the latter. And plating silver or mercury onto a base-metal disc could fool the frontier farmer in the same manner as pursuing a silver mine with an enchanted stone.² One character who practiced both alchemy and counterfeiting was a certain Joseph Bill Packer, a second cousin once removed of Samuel Bill, who married Joseph Smith’s aunt Lydia Mack in 1786.³ Another practitioner, Justus Winchell, or “Wingate” of the New Israelite group was

1. Sources of information on early American counterfeiting include but are not limited to: Kenneth Scott, *Counterfeiting in Colonial America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), first published by Oxford University Press, 1957; Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters* (Harvard University Press, 2007); and Lynne Glaser, *Counterfeiting in America: The History of an American Way to Wealth* (Danvers, MA: Clarkson Potter, Inc., 1968).

2. See John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 105–28, for a lengthy discussion of alchemy, divining, counterfeiting, “puffers and smoke-sellers,” and others.

3. Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, 108.

known as a both a “rodsman” (treasure diviner) and counterfeiter (see next section of this article). Although such activities were often considered “demonic” and condemned by the Christian orthodox, it might be said that the magic-talisman preoccupation of early Mormonism carried a more “angelic” mien.

Some scholars, most notably D. Michael Quinn, have disagreed with this construction, noting that while the metaphysical and counterfeit worlds coexisted, he could find no overlap in their actual practice, saying:

I find no credible evidence that American counterfeiters saw themselves as engaged in an alchemical quest. An early American town’s incidents of counterfeiting involved no more metaphysical belief than the town’s incidents of burglary, whereas the metaphysical was fundamental to participation in the treasure-quest of early America.⁴

In fact, Quinn could identify only one early Mormon, Jacob Zundel, “with a verified background of belief in alchemy.”⁵ And though they often lived in the same localities, counterfeiters and diviners could have been different groups who opposed each other, as the life of one Obadiah Wheeler of Rutland, Vermont suggests.⁶

Regardless of the disagreement, there was nonetheless a commonality in the end game for both the diviners and counterfeiters—that of the attraction to precious metals with pecuniary value. As such, it is perhaps no coincidence that the Book of Mormon speaks admiringly of metalworking, furnaces, and the like in its descriptions of ancient cultures. And there are detractors who would question to what degree the Book of Mormon itself might be regarded as a kind of ecclesiastical “counterfeit” in its own right.

Counterfeiting Roots in Vermont

The earliest allegations of counterfeiting are found in Vermont records, though these are often incomplete, ambiguous, or even missing altogether in their original form. For example, Vermont Supreme Court records show that Joseph Smith Sr. was named in two, possibly three court cases involving passing counterfeit bills in 1807, but do not tell the whole story.

The first one was *Vermont State Treasurer vs. Beniah Woodward et al.* and *State of Vermont vs. Beniah Woodward*.⁷ Tax assessment and census records reveal there were

4. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 307.

5. *Ibid.*, 307.

6. *Ibid.*, 384 n38, and Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, 121–28 for his exploration of the relationship between divining, alchemy, and counterfeiting.

7. *Vermont State Treasurer vs. Beniah Woodward et al.*, and *State of Vermont vs. Beniah Woodward*, Vermont Supreme Court Records, September 1807, Term, vol. 3, 84–86, State of Vermont Archives, Middlesex, Vermont. Also reprinted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:651–55.

no other Joseph Smiths in the Royalton area except for the one married to Lucy at that time.⁸ Although he may have been a victim in the case, in counterfeiting virtually no one was convicted unless one of the accomplices turned state's evidence—Beniah Woodward was fined, whipped and sentenced to two years hard labor. Regarding Smith Sr.'s time spent in Vermont, Hon. Daniel Woodward (1804–?), formerly judge of the Windsor County Court in Vermont and state legislator in 1849 was quoted as saying in an anonymous letter to the editors of the *Boston Transcript*:

Joseph Smith Sr., was, at times, engaged in hunting for Captain Kidd's buried treasure; and he also became implicated with one, Jack Downing, in counterfeiting money, but turned state's evidence and escaped the penalty.⁹

The judge may have used the pseudonym "Jack Downing" to protect his relative, Beniah Woodward.¹⁰

Joseph Smith Sr. may have been in another case, *The State vs Jabez Thomas*, where authorities prosecuted Abner Hays of Woodstock for passing counterfeit money to "Joseph Smith of Bethel."¹¹ Counterfeiting expert Kenneth Scott referred to this Joseph Smith as "perhaps the father of the Mormon leader."¹² Though there is no record of the Smiths living in Bethel, that he is listed as being from this town does not disqualify him as being this same "Joseph Smith." Bethel was only twelve miles from Royalton, and journalist James Gordon Bennett reported that Smith Sr. had been a peddler in Vermont.¹³ Peddlers typically travelled hundreds of miles in a year, and Bethel could have been one of the many places he stayed transiently. Often counterfeiterers were listed as "transient people," and peddlers had no fixed place of residence.¹⁴ We know that Smith Sr. rode to Bethel to fetch Dr. Joseph Addison Denison to

8. See Royalton, Vermont Assessment Records 1809–1811 and Census Records, 1810, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:651. See also Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1971, 2003), 31, for Mormon roots in Royalton, Vermont.

9. Daniel Woodward Account, Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:623–26. The account was reprinted the *Historical Magazine* in November of 1870.

10. *Ibid.*, 625.

11. Vermont Supreme Court Records, *The State vs. Jabez Thomas*, August Term, 1807, volume 3, 78–9, photocopy also in Wesley Walters' papers, Covenant Seminary Archives, St. Louis.

12. Kenneth Scott, "Counterfeiting in Early Vermont," *Vermont History* 33 (1965): 306–07

13. Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:284.

14. See J.R. Dolan, *The Yankee Peddlers of Early America* (New York; Clarkson N. Potter, 1964) and Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiterers*, 89.

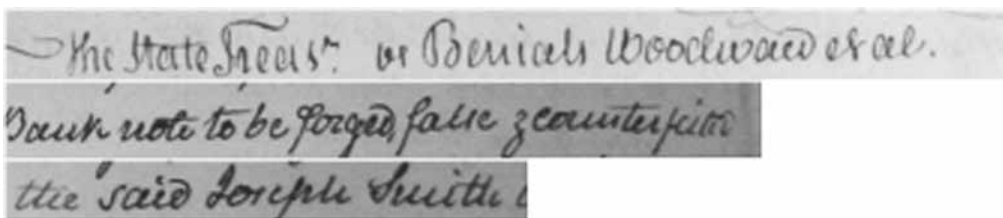


FIGURE 1: Photocopies of excerpts of original Vermont Supreme Court records of *The State Treasurer vs. Beniah Woodward, et. al.*, for counterfeiting, which names Joseph Smith Sr.

attend Lucy when Joseph Jr. was born.¹⁵ In addition, historian Fawn Brodie believed the man named in the case was Joseph Smith Sr.¹⁶

Since there is a consensus that most counterfeiters and their false bank notes in Vermont at that time were connected with the large operation run by Stephen Burroughs, these cases suggest that Smith Sr. may well have had a known or accidental connection with his network.¹⁷

In addition to Vermont court records, Judge Joel King Noble of Broome County, New York wrote a letter to historian and Professor Jonathan Baldwin Turner, of Illinois College in 1842. The former judge stated in part:

...Joe Smith Sr. lived in Vermont connected with a bunch of counterfeiters—ran—came to Mohawk River—eloped, (seduced a married woman) to Canada [then] came to Pennsylvania State. I firmly believe proof affidavits may be had to identify, like father like son.¹⁸

But before any of this, Joseph Smith Sr. and William Cowdery Jr. (Oliver Cowdery's father) were reported to have been part of a curious band of “rodsman” and counterfeiters known as the Woodscrape Group, or “New Israelites,” near Middletown, Vermont, between 1800 and 1802. Isaac and Elizabeth Lewis Hale (parents of Joseph Smith Jr.'s wife Emma) were probably involved as well, as Elizabeth's parents and siblings lived in nearby Wells during the activities.¹⁹ As Quinn notes:

15. Richard K. Behrens, “Dreams, Visions and Visitations: The Genesis of Mormonism,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 27 (2007): 174, quoting Larry C. Porter, “A Study of the Origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the State of New York and Pennsylvania.” PhD diss. Brigham Young University, 1971, 5.

16. Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1945, 1995), 7.

17. Stephen Mihm, “The Alchemy of the Self: Stephen Burroughs and the Counterfeit Economy of the Early Republic,” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2 no. 1 (2004): 151.

18. Judge Noble's original holograph letter is part of the Jonathan Baldwin Turner Collection, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.

19. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 129n 242.

...civil and family records demonstrate that the leaders of Vermont's Woodscrape originated in Connecticut and that the Woodscrape's rodsman Winchell and "Walter's the magician" of Palmyra originated in adjacent neighborhoods in Connecticut. In those same neighborhoods there were familial connections with three other associates of Joseph Smith in New York's folk magic: the Orrin Porter Rockwell family, Samuel Lawrence, and Alvah Beaman ...all the families originated in Connecticut and obviously were in touch with each other even after they moved from Connecticut.²⁰

The Woodscrape group was reported to have harbored reputed counterfeiters Justus Winchell (also known as "Wingate"), and Ephraim Wood.²¹ Winchell or "Wingate," was a "fugitive from justice from Orange County, Vermont, where he had been engaged in counterfeiting."²² A Reverend Laban Clark remembered Winchell/Wingate at once—"it was the name of a man who was detected about two years before in Bradford, Vermont, in milling counterfeit dollars. My father having been selectman of the town at the time, I had known the case well..." Clark was sure that the Woodscrape affair was "a movement to cover up a counterfeiting scheme," and everyone that he talked to about it concurred.²³

American historian John L. Brooke writes that "the evidence for Smith Sr. being involved in counterfeiting is at least as good, if not better, than the evidence for his involvement in the New Israelite movement."²⁴ A number of other casual or coincidental links between those in early Mormonism and known counterfeiters have been identified, though little can sometimes be confirmed of any unlawful collaboration. One such connection was that of the Rogerenes, a dissenting religious group, at least one of whom, Samuel Fox II of New London, had been convicted of passing false bills.²⁵ An infamous character named Ransford Rogers had roots in the Rogerenes. Brooke concluded he had connections with counterfeiting, and his money-digging methods bore a striking resemblance to those used by Joseph Smith Jr.²⁶ Lucy Mack

20. Ibid., 127, 129.

21. Barnes Frisbie Account, 1867, in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 614. See also Kathleen K. Melonakos, *Secret Combinations: Evidence of Early Mormon Counterfeiting 1800–1847* (San Diego: Lyrical Productions, 2016), 71, quoting Kenneth Scott, "Counterfeiting in Early Vermont," 299 and Vermont Supreme Court Record Series, SE-118, Vol. 11, 180, 192. Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, Middlesex, Vermont.

22. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 123, see also 116–35 for more on Winchell/Wingate. See also photocopy of arrest warrant for Paine Wingate, Chelsea, VT Superior Court Records, vol. 1 in Wesley Walters papers from Covenant Theological Seminary Archives, St. Louis, MO, and in author's possession. It was apparently not the first time Wingate was arrested—see also bill for Wingate's arrest by Sherriff Micah Barron, April 26, 1797, Vermont State Papers, vol. 11, 196, and Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 349.

23. Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 614.

24. Ibid., 138.

25. Ibid., 53, 117.

26. For more on the connections between the Rogerenes and the Smith family, see Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, 62–63. For more on Joseph Smith Jr.'s distant cousin Ransford Rogers and his methods, see *ibid.*, 62–68,

Smith's great grandfather, John Mack Jr., had married the niece of Rogerenes Samuel and Bathsheba Fox, and Lucy's uncle, Elisha Mack, had also married into the Rogerenes.²⁷

Activities in New York State and Pennsylvania

Apparently Justus Winchell, noted above, continued his association with the Smiths in Palmyra, New York. Barnes Frisbie and other residents of Middletown, Vermont, believed that Winchell had gone to Palmyra years before the advent of Mormonism, "early enough to get Joe Smith's father to digging for money." Frisbie had talked to "men who were here during the Wood affair, and afterwards removed to Palmyra, and knew him in both places."²⁸ The *Palmyra Register* and other newspapers reported that a man named Justus Winchell received letters in Palmyra between 1819 and 1824.²⁹

Looking back on their associations with the Smith family, several neighbors indicated their suspicions that the Smiths had engaged in counterfeiting, though they often did not describe direct evidence. In Palmyra, New York, C.M. Stafford, described a 40 to 50 foot cave that the Smiths had built, indicating that many had "surmised was intended for counterfeiting."³⁰ And in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, Sheriff McKune "strongly suspected that Smith and his gang were counterfeiters."³¹

Pomeroy Tucker, a Palmyra resident and Smith family observer, wrote that as a youth, Joseph Smith Jr. loved reading "stories of Stephen Burroughs and Captain Kidd."³² Burroughs, the Vermont counterfeiter noted above who was famous for having impersonated a preacher would assert in his best-selling *Memoirs* that as long as people *believed* counterfeit notes to be of value, they were indeed of value.³³ The

Philanthropist, *An Account of the Beginning, Transactions and Discovery of Ransford Rogers* (Newark, NJ: 1792) and Brooke, *Refiners Fire*, 31,53,54, 63, 85,103,117,122,124–277, 251.

27. Val D. Rust, *Radical Origins of Early Mormon Converts and their Colonial Ancestors* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 105, and Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 80.

28. Frisbie Account, Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, Vol. 1, pp. 618- 620.

29. Quinn, *Magic World View*, 121–22.

30. Deming Collection, Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:195. See also Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 27 (Fall, 1994), for more on the cave, including photographs.

31. Frederick Mather, *Early Days of Mormonism*, Lippincott's Magazine 26, no. 152, Philadelphia, Lippincott Co., 201, <http://www.olivercowdery.com/smithhome/1880Math.htm> .

32. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism: Biography of Its Founders and History of Its Church*, (New York: Appleton and Company, 1867), 17.

33. For a profile of Stephen Burroughs with references see Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, 45–50. See also Stephen Mihm, "The Alchemy of the Self: Stephen Burroughs and the Counterfeit Economy of the Early Republic,"

library in nearby Manchester, New York, carried a copy of Burroughs's *Memoirs*, giving Smith access to it even if the family did not own a copy.³⁴

Counterfeiting Accusations in Ohio

It could be fairly said that the printing of bank notes on the Kirtland Safety Society Bank was an example of bogus currency to the extent that the directors knew the bank was extraordinarily undercapitalized. Unable to obtain a charter in Ohio, leaders changed the name to the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Company, requiring that the already printed notes be manually altered to reflect the new name. Specifically, the Kirtland Anti-bank, though capitalized at \$4,000,000 (most new banks were authorized for up to \$100,000)³⁵ had collected only \$6,000 in specie from investors.³⁶ Several sources have said that the specie was in fact not used to redeem bank notes but to pay pre-existing outstanding debts.³⁷

In addition, according to defecting "anti-bank" officer Cyrus Smalling, Joseph Smith ordered his followers to exchange illegal Kirtland dollars at fifty cents on the dollar for the notes of legitimate banks. Brigham Young was said to have passed off forty thousand dollars, Apostle John F. Boynton, twenty thousand, and Apostle Luke Johnson, an unknown amount. According to apostate Cyrus Smalling, they continued to "pass and sell the worthless stuff until they sold it at twelve and a half cents on the dollar," and bought a section of land in Illinois with the proceeds.³⁸ And Mrs. Alfred Morley reported that:

Jo's brother Bill, Leonard Rich, Julius Granger, Amasa Bonney, and his brother-in-law, Mr. Booth, would know of Mormons moving to Kirtland from the East and would intercept them and say they were going East, and induce them to exchange their Eastern money for Mormon money, which they could use in Kirtland. Many were swindled by them.³⁹

Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal 2, no. 1 (2004), 128, and Stephen Burroughs, *Memoirs*, reprint of 1811 edition (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

34. Robert Paul, "Joseph Smith and the Manchester Library," *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 (1982): 12.

35. Dale W. Adams, "Chartering the Kirtland Bank," *BYU Studies* 23 no. 4 (October 1, 1983): 9.

36. See Kirtland Safety Society Articles of Agreement, http://www.saintswithouthalos.com/p/1837_kss_arts.phtml. Both Cyrus Smalling and Warren Parrish, both officers of the bank, published that \$6,000 was the top amount of specie ever held in the bank.

37. See E.G. Lee, *Knavery Exposed*, 14, and Warren Parrish Letter to the Editor of the *Painesville Republican*, February, 15, 1838, and Adams, "Chartering the Kirtland Bank," 8.

38. Cyrus Smalling, *Knavery Exposed*, 14.

39. Mrs. Alfred Morley Statement, Kirtland, Ohio, February 27, 1885, in Arthur Deming, *Naked Truths About Mormonism*, Oakland California, Jan. 1888, at <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/CA/natruths.htm#040088-2g1>.

There was considerable cross-accusation of wrongdoing among the bank officials themselves. Treasurer Warren Parrish, who left the church after the bank's failure, published his side of the bank story, saying the Mormon leaders "lie by revelation, swindle by revelation, cheat and defraud by revelation..."⁴⁰

In return, Sidney Rigdon retaliated by bitterly accusing Parrish:

Parrish stole the paper out of the institution [the Kirtland Safety Society] and went to buying bogus or counterfeit coin with it, becoming a partner with the Tinker's Creek blacklegs and in company with Julius Granger, in buying different kinds of property with it, and devoting it to his own use... He was aided by his former associates to take his paper, and go and buy bogus with it from the Tinker's creek black legs and on the way coming home, they would waylay Parrish and his gang and rob them, so they would lose the bogus money; at last Parrish sold his horse and carriage for bogus money, and behold, when he came home and opened his box of bogus, it was sand and stones.⁴¹

Leaving aside the activities of the Kirtland bank, there were numerous accusations and counter-accusations of individual counterfeiting among the Mormon community in Ohio as well. Former Danite Reed Peck said he believed the Mormon leaders and the dissenters were probably guilty of counterfeiting because they accused each other of it,⁴² and former church historian John Corrill would report that the leaders accused the dissenters of counterfeiting.⁴³ Joseph H. Jackson, one of Joseph Smith's aides-de-camp and close confidantes in Nauvoo who later turned state's evidence against him, published in a pamphlet in 1844 that Joseph Smith had revealed to him that Mormon leaders had indeed been involved in counterfeiting in Kirtland.⁴⁴ Hyrum Smith later accused Jackson of "trying to make bogus, which was his principal business."⁴⁵

When Oliver Cowdery was excommunicated in 1838, one of the charges against him was being in the bogus business, "as common report says." Cowdery replied in his own defense to the excommunication letter but did not address the charges of counterfeiting.⁴⁶ In the "Danite Manifesto" signed by Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon and eighty-four Danites, specific descriptions of Cowdery's counterfeiting were alleged:

40. Warren Parrish, letter to the *Painesville Republican* 2, no. 14–15 (February 15, 1838).

41. *Elder's Journal* (August 1838): 58–59, reprinted by Utah Lighthouse Ministry.

42. Reed Peck, *Manuscript*, 5.

43. John Corrill, *History*, 27.

44. Joseph L. Jackson, *The Adventures and Experience of Joseph H. Jackson in Nauvoo, Disclosing the Depths of Mormon Villainy* (Warsaw, IL: 1846, first published 1844), 15.

45. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 127, and 36 n120 for references.

46. See copies of both letters in Stanley R. Gunn, *Oliver Cowdery, Second Elder and Scribe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 151–55.

Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Lyman E. Johnson, united with a gang of counterfeiters, thieves, liars, and blacklegs of the deepest dye, to deceive, cheat, and defraud the saints out of their property, by every art and stratagem which wickedness could invent... you kept up a continual correspondence with your gang of marauders in Kirtland, encouraging them to go on with their iniquity...; stealing, cheating, lying; instituting vexatious lawsuits; selling bogus money, and also, stones and sand for bogus; in which nefarious business, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Lyman E. Johnson, were engaged while you were there... you are at this time engaged with a gang of counterfeiters, coiners, and blacklegs, as some of those characters have lately visited our city from Kirtland, and told what they had come for...⁴⁷

The gang of counterfeiters leaders referred to could have been the Ohio branch of the ring headed up by brothers James and Daniel Brown from upstate New York. The Brown brothers led the “Bureau of Bogus Banking in the West, if not America,” that some said involved a network of more than a thousand participants. The ring printed up, bought, sold, and distributed bogus bank notes for years, organizing covert agents in every part of the country. Introduction into the inner circle required an “oath of secrecy” that bound each candidate to murder any member who revealed the company’s secrets.⁴⁸

Joseph Smith’s gunsmith and Kirtland temple choir director, M.C. Davis, along with certain other members of the Mormon community appear to have been connected with the Brown brothers’ group. For example, Joseph Smith’s second counselor Frederick G. Williams announced in a council meeting that “Oliver [Cowdery] told him a member named [Marvel C.] Davis could make metal currency dies so fine that the counterfeit could not be detected from the real thing.”⁴⁹ In addition, Samuel Lane, a newspaper editor who took on the Brown brothers in his newspaper *The Buzzard*, named Mormon bishop “Joe Keeler of Portage as one of their principal bogus dealers.”⁵⁰ Sheriff Lucius Bierce stated in his *Reminiscences of Summit County*:

This town [New Portage] was formerly known as the residence of Joe Keeler, celebrated as a Mormon preacher and dealer in bogus money. He built and resided in a brick house just north of the canal bridge in New Portage.⁵¹

47. *Senate Document 189*, Ebenezer Robinson said the signers of the document were all Danites and this document has become known as the Danite Manifesto, Quinn, *Origins of Power* 94.

48. For more on the Brown Brothers see Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, 291–98, Mihm, *Nation of Counterfeiters*, 160–79, Samuel Lane, *Fifty Years and Over of Akron and Summit County* (Akron: Beacon Job Department, 1892), 649, 878, 882, 922, and Jonathan Green, *Secret Band of Brothers* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1858), 17–18.

49. Minutes of April 12, 1838, Council Meeting in Far West, quoted in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Mormon Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Lighthouse Ministry), 53.

50. Lane, *Fifty Years*, 878. See also William Donohue Ellis, *The Cuyahoga*, chapter 15, 1998.

51. Lucius Bierce, *Historical Reminiscences of Summit County* (Akron: Canfield Publishers, 57 <http://archive.org/stream/historicalreminooobiergoog#page/n64/mode/2up>).

Joseph Smith appointed Joe Keeler (1787–1868) to be bishop, mentioned him in his journal, and presided at several conferences where Keeler was present, for instance the September 8, 1834 conference in New Portage.⁵² Keeler was born at Ridgefield, Connecticut and married Olive Brite in 1811.⁵³ The Minute Book on February 9, 1834 reveals that the branch at New Portage under Keeler supplied funds for Zion's camp and to build the Kirtland temple.⁵⁴ He apparently left the church around 1835.⁵⁵

Evidence for Counterfeiting in Missouri

More testimony referring to Mormon counterfeiting is found in the Missouri period. For instance, Joseph Smith is recorded to have said in a Far West, Missouri meeting that a Mr. Sapham, a non-Mormon, told him that a warrant had been issued against Oliver Cowdery for "being engaged in making a purchase of bogus money and dies." Smith said he warned him to escape if he was guilty. If so, then Smith acted as an accessory to Cowdery's actions.⁵⁶

Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith and the other eighty four Danites of the "Danite Manifesto" had this to say about Oliver Cowdery's departure from Ohio:

During the full career of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer's bogus money business, it got abroad into the world that they were engaged in it, and several gentlemen were preparing to commence a prosecution against Cowdery: he finding it out, took with him Lyman E. Johnson, and fled to Far West with their families... he was saved from the penitentiary by the influence of two influential men of the place.⁵⁷

Missouri citizen William Peniston charged the Mormons with counterfeiting in a public speech on Aug. 6, 1838, setting off a firestorm which became an Election Day brawl, saying "they are a set of horse thieves, liars and counterfeiters..."⁵⁸ A man named William Swartzell spent four months with the Mormons in Missouri, but then defected and published in his journal:

[Hyrum Smith] gave a blackleg [counterfeiter] several hundred dollars of Kirtland money to play off for good money, and with the good money brother Hiram bought a

52. Scott Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 131, and Minute Book, New Portage Conference, September 8, 1834, 49–50, www.josephsmithpapers.org

53. See *ibid.*, (Joseph Smith papers), 561.

54. Conference Minutes of November 18, 1835.

55. Joseph Smith papers, 561.

56. *A History of the Latter Day Saints in Northern Missouri From 1836 to 1839* (Brigham Young University, 1965), quoted in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Mormon Kingdom*, 53.

57. *Senate Document 189*, 8. The two influential men mentioned are unknown.

58. Quoted in Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 225.

half section of land near Jacksonville, Illinois, for the purpose of establishing another stake, or city of Zion.⁵⁹

After Mormon leaders spent five months in the Liberty jail under accusations of arson, riot, burglary, treason and receiving stolen goods, they escaped to Illinois. Accusations and evidences of counterfeiting followed them to Nauvoo.

Accusations of Counterfeiting in Nauvoo

In his *History of Illinois* Governor Thomas Ford stated he believed the Mormons had settled in Hancock County because other counterfeiters such as Isaac Galland (Joseph Smith's partner and real estate agent for over a year) already lived there, and "rogues will find each other out."⁶⁰ Colonel J.M. Reid, in his history, devoted several pages to a sketch of Dr. Galland, the prophet Smith, and counterfeiting in Nauvoo.⁶¹ Edward Bonney, one of three non-Mormon members of the Council of Fifty, was cited in *The Official Minutes of the Nauvoo Lodge*, as ". . . not averse to passing the 'long green' of counterfeit bills when it suited his purpose. ." ⁶²Bonney would later turn state's evidence against the Nauvoo Danites and write *Banditti of the Prairies*, an insider's exposé.⁶³

Another member of the Council of Fifty, Marinus G. Eaton, "a counterfeiter from New York State," was one of Joseph Smith's closest associates during the run-up to the assassination.⁶⁴ "Adventurer" Joseph H. Jackson lived in Nauvoo for over a year as Smith's real estate agent, aide-de-camp and riding companion, but in the spring of 1844 broke with him, becoming allied with his disaffected second counselor William Law and the other publishers of the *Nauvoo Expositor*. Jackson published allegations of Smith's counterfeiting and other crimes in the June 1, 1844, *Warsaw Signal*, claiming that what he said was inside information.

The *Nauvoo Expositor* published that Jackson's statements were true in its sole issue of June 7, 1844. More reports of Nauvoo counterfeiting appeared in the *Warsaw Signal* on June 12, and on the same day, *The Sangamo Journal* published a letter from former insider Charles Foster alleging that "it is a fact generally known that

59. William Swartzell, *Mormonism Exposed, Being a Journal of a Residence in Missouri, May 28–August 20, 1838* (Pittsburgh, PA: O. Pekin, 1840, utlm.org reprint), 25.

60. Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois*, (Chicago: C.S. Griggs and Co., 1854), 406–07.

61. Col. J. M. Reid, *Sketches and Anecdotes of the Old Settlers and New Comers, The Mormon Banditti and Danite Band* (Keokuk, IA: R. B Ogden, 1876): 146–49.

62. *History of the Church*, 6:500 and 556, Mervin Hogan, ed., *The Official Minutes of Nauvoo Lodge U.D.* (Des Moines, IA: Research Lodge No. 2, 1974), 62 cited in D. Michael Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 127, 363n119,

63. Homewood Publishing, 1856.

64. See arrest warrant from New York State, September 5, 1844, Illinois Executive Records (1843–47), 4:208, quoted in Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 127–28 and 363n120.

[Joseph Smith] has been prominently engaged in the manufacture of bogus money and counterfeiting.”

Meanwhile, according to Jackson, when “the large amount of spurious money afloat caused a great excitement in the city,” the Mormon leaders accused *Expositor* publishers Wilson and William Law and the other dissenters of counterfeiting.⁶⁵ The *Nauvoo Neighbor* described them as:

a knot of base men, to further their wicked and malicious designs towards the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and to bolster up the intents of blacklegs and bogus-makers, and advocate the characters of murderers, established a press in this city last week...⁶⁶

Brigham Young called Jackson and his friends “liars” in the *Times and Seasons* as well.⁶⁷ Leaders also accused the dissenters of counterfeiting and other crimes during the Nauvoo City Council meeting on June 8, 1844, before Mayor Smith ordered the destruction of the *Expositor* press and the building that housed it.⁶⁸ Smith then vilified the dissenters as “counterfeiters and bogus-makers” who were taking away his constitutional rights in a letter defending his actions to Governor Ford.⁶⁹ Clerk Willard Richards wrote a letter to the wealthy New York newspaperman James Arlington Bennett on June 20, 1844, describing the dissenters as a “band of thieves, counterfeiters, bogus-makers, gamblers, debauchers, murderers and all that is vile.”⁷⁰ Joseph Smith publicly denied all wrongdoing till the end, maintaining in his last speech on June 17, “We have never violated the laws of our country.”⁷¹

Thomas Sharp, editor of the *Warsaw Signal* would publish on July 10, 1844, that the Mormon “aggressions on the rights and property of their neighbors,” including “harboring counterfeiters, horse-thieves and blacklegs,” was the motivation for the assassination of the Smith brothers, not religious prejudice.⁷² The following year on December 18, 1845, a grand jury brought federal indictments for counterfeiting against Edward Bonney, Marinus G. Eaton, and Joseph H. Jackson along with nine other Nauvoo leaders including Theodore Turley, Augustus Barton, Peter Haws,

65. Jackson, *Adventures and Experience*, 16.

66. *Nauvoo Neighbor*, and quoted in the *Warsaw Signal*, June 12, 1844.

67. *Times and Seasons* 5 (1844): 664, quoted in Tanner and Tanner, *Mormon Kingdom*, vol. 2, 52.

68. Nauvoo City Council Meeting Minutes, June 8, 1844, *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM*, 1998, Smith Associates.

69. Joseph Smith to Governor Thomas Ford, Nauvoo, June 14, 1844, in John E. Hallwas and Roger D. Launius, *Cultures in Conflict* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1995), 185–86.

70. Willard Richards to James Arlington Bennett, reprinted in Hallwas and Launius, *Cultures in Conflict*, 67.

71. The Last Speech of Joseph Smith, June 17, 1844, in Hallwas and Launius, *Cultures in Conflict*, 192.

72. Thomas Sharp, *Warsaw Signal*, July 10, 1844, in Hallwas and Launius, *Cultures in Conflict*, 248.

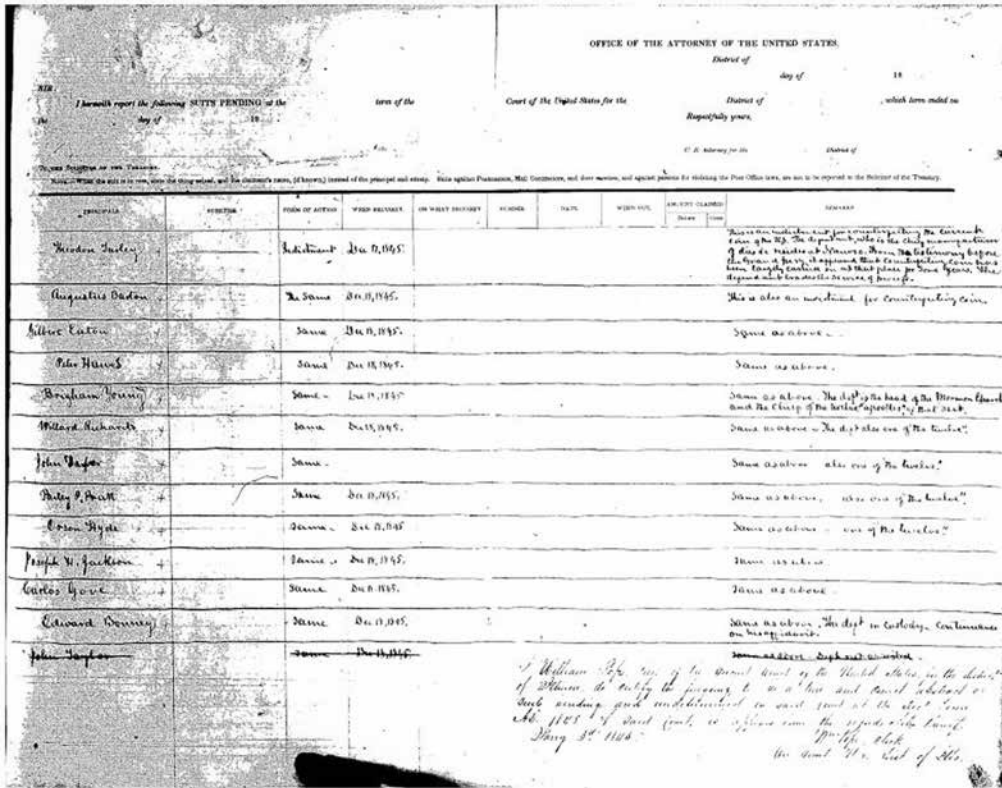


FIGURE 2 Photocopy of federal indictments for counterfeiting Dec. 18, 1845

Brigham Young, Willard Richards, John Taylor, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Hyde, and Carlos Gove.⁷³

Young and the other leaders for these indictments, however they vigorously defied the authorities. For example, in December of 1845, William Miller disguised himself as Young, hoaxing the Deputy U.S. Marshal to believe he and his officers had arrested Young in an escapade that has become known as the “Bogus Brigham Affair.” When the officers discovered it was Miller instead of Young, they had to let him go. Young denied the counterfeiting but later exclaimed that tricking the U.S. Marshall was one of the “best jokes ever perpetrated.”⁷⁴

73. These records can be viewed on line from Record Group 206 and Record Group 46, p. 120 at: <https://archive.org/stream/RecordGroup206AndRecordGroup46/Record%20Group%20206%20and%20Record%20Group%2046#page/n119/mode/1up>. See also a photocopy of the federal indictments in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism, Shadow or Reality*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987), 539 and more about Nauvoo counterfeiting, 535–44, Tanner and Tanner, *The Mormon Kingdom*, vol. 2 (utlm.org, 1971), 51–70, and Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, chapter 15, “The Federal Government Cracks Down on the Nauvoo Bogus Makers,” 404–50.

74. *History of the Church*, December 1845, 7: 549, 551, and *Journal of Discourses*, speech delivered July 23, 1871, 14: 218–19. See also *Warsaw Signal*, December 31, 1845, reprinted in Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism, Shadow or*

Church leaders such as B.H. Roberts have subsequently maintained that “there is not the slightest evidence that ‘the twelve’ were in any way connected with alleged counterfeiting” in Nauvoo and the indictments were “a trumped up charge” to hasten the removal of the Mormons. He continued:

... some counterfeiters had located at Nauvoo, but were routed by the diligence of the church leaders against them and their illegal traffic. These were the parties who made the charges of counterfeiting against the brethren at Springfield.⁷⁵

The grand jury records of the indictments were destroyed in a fire, so we do not know exactly what the jurors said, however newspapers all over the country such as the *Daily National Intelligencer* reported that the indictments charged that Joseph Smith “used to work at the business with his own hands,” that the amount counterfeited was immense, and the business had been carried on for some years, and other details.⁷⁶

Neither were the federally indicted leaders the only high-ranking Mormons accused of counterfeiting. Dr. William Wyl in *Mormon Portraits* gave testimony that Joseph Smith’s brother William Smith was the “chief manager...in the distribution of counterfeit money” with his brother-in-law W. Jenkins Salisbury as partner.⁷⁷ William Smith made counterfeiting charges against Brigham Young and the other brethren, for instance, in the *Sangamo Journal*.⁷⁸ Joseph Smith’s plural wife, Sarah Cleveland, who was concurrent wife of Judge John Cleveland was committed to the Niagara Jail for passing \$390 “with intent to defraud,” but was released on bail with no known record of going on trial.⁷⁹ Smith’s boyhood friend, bodyguard and Danite leader Porter Rockwell was widely considered to be “an outlaw that has long been sheltered by Joe Smith and the Mormons... he is also said to be privy to the most of

Realty, 537–38.

75 *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 2:532–33; and Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism, Shadow or Reality?*, 541.

76. Grand jury records were destroyed in a fire according to author Joseph Johnstun in a phone interview with author, May 14, 2013. See also *The Daily National Intelligencer* January 5, 1846, *The Springfield Journal*, December 25, 1845, and *The Warsaw Signal*, January 7, 1846, reprinted in Tanner and Tanner, *The Mormon Kingdom*, vol. 2 (utlm.org), 56, and *The Weekly Picayune*, January 12, 1846, New Orleans, Louisiana, 8, no. 48.

77. See Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, 413–14, 438–39, and William Wyl, in *Mormon Portraits: Joseph Smith, the Prophet and His Family and Friends* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing, 1886), reprinted by Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 38, 117.

78. *Sangamo Journal*, Springfield, Illinois, November 6, 1845.

79. See *Cleveland Herald and Gazette*, July 17, 1837 quoted in Edward Firmage and Richard Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts: A Legal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints 1830-1900*, (University of Illinois Press, 1988, 2001), 57, 385n23.

the iniquity and particularly the counterfeiting which has been going on in the Holy City.”⁸⁰

In Summary

Amid the clutter of accusations and counter-accusations in the early Mormon milieu, and considering additional evidence of counterfeiting not included here, one must conclude that bogus money did indeed circulate among Mormons and non-Mormons alike—and with at least tacit tolerance of the movement’s struggling leadership.⁸¹ Perhaps historian Will Bagley made the consensus case as he concluded the following:

...the persistence of such charges [of counterfeiting] in Illinois, Iowa, New York, California, and ultimately in Utah Territory suggests that counterfeiting, like polygamy, was a publicly condemned but secretly sanctioned activity in early Mormon society.⁸²

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80. For instance, see *Quincy Whig*, May 6, 1846 quoted in Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, 435, and the other sources cited.

81. For more on Mormon counterfeiting, see Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, Melonakos, *Secret Combinations*, Quinn, *Origins of Power*, Tanner and Tanner, *Mormonism Shadow or Reality*, 528–35, *The Mormon Kingdom*, vol. 2, 51–70, and Joseph H. Jackson, *The Adventures and Experience of Joseph H. Jackson in Nauvoo, Disclosing the Depths of Mormon Villainy*, 1844, 1846. For research on Jackson and his allegations, see Joseph Johnstun and Will Bagley, “Assassination, Robbery and Seduction: Joseph H. Jackson’s Nauvoo Adventures,” 1842–1846, unpublished paper, 2014, and forthcoming book on this topic by Joseph Johnstun.

82. David Bigler and Will Bagley, *Army of Israel: Mormon Battalion Narratives* (Spokane, WA: Clark Co., 2000), 402.