

# Salamander Letter

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The Church of Jesus Christ  
of Latter-day Saints

MEMORANDUM

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To: Area directors, associate area directors, teaching support consultants, CES coordinators, institute directors, seminary principals

From: Zone administrators (Curriculum and Instruction Division)

Date: 2 October 1985

Subject: A Research Review

As we begin teaching the history of the Church and the Doctrine and Covenants this year, questions may arise in the classroom regarding recent press reports about two old letters. For over a year controversy has been stirring concerning the contents of these letters, one supposedly written by Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell in June 1825 and the other purportedly written by Martin Harris to William W. Phelps in October 1830. Since there are so few original documents currently available from the 1820s that deal with this period, historians have anxiously studied the contents of these two letters, hoping to obtain greater insight into the beginnings of the Restoration.

Accompanying this memo are materials to help you become familiar with the situation. We urge you to read these materials as soon as possible, and where appropriate provide copies of these materials to the full-time seminary and institute of religion teachers under your charge. These items are not to be distributed to students, but are for the benefit of teachers as they are called upon to answer the questions of students. It is not intended that this information be taught in the classroom. We do not believe that many seminary students are intensely interested in this subject. Thus, we would suggest that teachers not discuss the issue unless there is an honest and sincere inquiry.

The following materials are attached:

1. Copy of Joseph Smith's 1825 letter.
2. Copy of Martin Harris's 1830 Letter.
3. Excerpts from statements by President Gordon B. Hinckley.
4. Excerpts from a talk by Elder Dallin H. Oaks.
5. An article that has been prepared to provide information on the acquisition of the two letters and on the historical background of the period when these two letters were purportedly written.

## Excerpts from "Reading Church History," an address by Elder Dallin H. Oaks to the 1985 CES Doctrine and Covenants Symposium at Brigham Young University, 16 August 1985.

"Some recent news stories about developments in Church history rest on scientific assumptions or assertions, such as the authenticity of a letter. Whether experts or amateurs, most of use have a tendency to be quite dogmatic about so-called scientific facts. Since news writers are not immune from this tendency, news stories based on scientific assumptions should be read or viewed with some skepticism ....

"... This susceptibility [of news media to convey erroneous information about facts] obviously applies to newly discovered documents whose authenticity turns on an evaluation of handwriting, paper, ink, and so on. As readers we should be skeptical about the authenticity of such documents, especially when we are unsure where they were found or who had custody of them for 150 years. Newly found, historically important documents can be extremely valuable, so there is a powerful incentive for those who own them to advocate and support their authenticity. The recent spectacular fraud involving the so-called Hitler diaries reminds us of this and should convince us to be cautious ....

"Balance is telling both sides. This is not the mission of official Church literature or avowedly anti-Mormon literature. Neither has any responsibility to present both sides. But when supposedly objective news media or periodicals run a feature or an article on the Church or its doctrines, it ought to be balanced. So should a book length history or biography. Readers of supposedly objective authors and publishers have a right to expect balance in writing about the Church or its doctrines. Some such writing is balanced, but much is not. In this arena, readers should beware of writings that imply balance but do not

deliver it. ...

"Another source of differences in the accounts of different witnesses is the different meanings that different persons attach to words. We have a vivid illustration of this in the recent media excitement about the word *salamander* in a letter Martin Harris is supposed to have sent to W. W. Phelps over 150 years ago. All of the scores of media stories on that subject apparently assume that the author of that letter used the word *salamander* in the modern sense of a 'tailed amphibian.'

"One wonders why so many writers neglected to reveal to their readers that there is another meaning of *salamander*, which may even have been the primary meaning in this context in the 1820s. That meaning, which is listed second in a current edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary*, is 'a spirit supposed to live in fire' (2d College ed. 1982, s.v. 'salamander'). Modern and ancient literature contain many examples of this usage ....

"In view of all this, and as a matter of intellectual evaluation, why all the excitement in the media, and why the apparent hand-wringing among those who profess friendship with or membership in the Church? The media should make more complete disclosures, but Latter-day Saint readers should also be more sophisticated in their evaluation of what they read.

"For Latter-day Saints, evaluation also has a spiritual dimension. This is because of our belief in Moroni's declaration that 'by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things' (Moroni 10:5). That promise assures spiritually sensitive readers a power of discernment that will help them evaluate the meaning of what they learn."