

Digital Only

The Sacred Duty of Record Keeping

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Beginning with the early Church and continuing today, the Lord has instructed His people to preserve and cherish their records and histories.

The records and history of the Church have been important to the Lord from the beginning. He taught Adam and Eve to keep “a book of remembrance” (Moses 6:5), counseled the ancient prophets to keep records, and checked to ensure that the Nephite records were complete (see 3 Nephi 23:7–13). In this dispensation, He taught Joseph Smith and other early leaders that “there shall be a record kept among you,” that the records and histories should be kept “continually,” and that doing so would “be for the good of the church, and for the rising generations” (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1; 47:3; 69:8).

The Offices of Church Historian and Church Recorder

It has been my great privilege to serve as the Church Historian and Recorder for the past seven years. In Joseph Smith’s day, the offices of Church Historian and Church Recorder began as separate positions held by two different men. However, as the Saints gathered in Nauvoo, the work of the two offices was combined and assigned to Elder Willard Richards (1804–1854) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. During Elder Richards’s time of service, Church members lived along the Mississippi River in Illinois and Iowa, throughout the eastern United States and Canada, and in the British Isles and the isles of the Pacific. Joseph Smith instructed that “it would be very difficult for one recorder to be present at all times, and to do all the business.” Thus, “there can be a recorder appointed in each ward of the city. ... Then, let there be a general recorder, to whom these other records can be handed, being attended with certificates over their own signatures, certifying that the record they have made is true” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:3–4).

Hence, since the 1840s, official records of the Church have been created all over the world and the single office of Church Historian and Recorder has borne the general responsibility to care for the Church’s records and histories. Elder Richards took this responsibility quite seriously when he oversaw the transportation of the Church’s records by wagon across the North American plains to the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

Over the years my predecessors have gathered records from around the world, stored them safely, and used them to serve the needs of the Church.

Church Records Inspire Us

To me, Church history is one of the most exciting aspects of the gospel. I gain strength from what others have done that have gone before me. While I might not be asked to pull a handcart across the plains, we all figuratively pull our own handcarts in life. We all have trials and challenges to deal with that are unique to us and sometimes very difficult. I love the examples of our forefathers, our pioneers who went before and gave so much to establish the gospel and raise their families in the Church. Their devotion, courage, and sacrifice help me believe I too can do hard things. Their example helps me want to do better.

When we hear the word *pioneer*, we often think about handcarts and covered wagons heading west across the plains of North America, but pioneers include members living today in countries all over the world. We seek to record and share their stories. It blesses us to understand how they found the Church, what they did to join, what sacrifices they made, and how it changed their lives for the better.

Preserving and Protecting Church Records

Today, the records of the Church are organized, managed, and preserved according to the highest standards. The records are created in local Church units and then stored in the Church History Library in Salt Lake City or in one of the Church's more than two dozen record preservation centers all around the world. These special facilities are designed to preserve and protect records against loss, theft, fire, earthquakes, and extreme climate conditions. Some of the records are created on paper, but most now begin as digital files or information stored in electronic databases.

We keep the records because of the Lord's commandments, and we use them to support the Church's work of salvation and to help the Saints remember. Records help us see and understand the hand of God and His dealings in our lives (see 1 Nephi 19:22; Omni 1:17; Mosiah 1:3). Reviewing sacred records and histories can lead to revelation and knowledge (see 1 Nephi 5:17; Doctrine and Covenants 93:53). The records of the Church are also shared to strengthen the rising generations by publishing accurate historical information for use in seminary and institute classes and through other Church publications and programs (see 1 Nephi 5:21; Mosiah 1:4; Abraham 1:31). These same records also present the truth of the restored gospel to the public (see Joseph Smith—History 1:1) and broaden their understanding of and respect for the early members of the Church.

Recent Record-Keeping Projects

In the past few years, we have studied the records collected throughout the Church's history to prepare several significant works for the members of the

Church:

- Since 2012, we have been digitizing our paper records and sharing them online in the Church History Catalog, where anyone in the world can find and view many of them.
- We have also published in print and online some of the Church's early records with helpful annotations: Joseph Smith's papers, records from the first 50 years of Relief Society, and sermons of Latter-day Saint women.
- The study of Joseph Smith's papers allowed us to provide updated information in the headings of the 2013 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.
- We prepared brief essays to help explain the historical context of these modern revelations.
- Through a similar process of study, conversations with experts, and inspired reviews by General Authorities, we prepared more than a dozen essays on gospel topics, such as the First Vision, the translation of scripture, and important doctrine revealed during our early history.
- In recent months, we've begun to release a series of "Global Histories" that tell the history of the Church in various nations around the world. More country-specific histories will follow in coming months.
- And last year we published the first of four volumes of a new narrative history of the Church titled *Saints*, together with more than 100 supplemental essays on historical topics (from Joseph Smith and his family to histories of music, temple work, and Sabbath worship among the Saints). Three more volumes of *Saints* will be released in the coming years.

Personal Record Keeping

Our personal records may not become part of the official records of the Church, but they are important to us and our children. Some of the most inspiring history comes from the diaries and journals of everyday people like you and me. We gain strength from the stories of those who have gone before. We learn how to be strong and what brings happiness and joy in our lives. We also learn that God's children are not and never have been perfect and that He can accomplish His work through people just like you and me, even if we have shortcomings.

I pray that you will be able to recognize the hand of the Lord in your life—and remember it. These memories will be formed and renewed through praying, searching the scriptures, partaking of the sacrament, and keeping records of your personal experience. Remembering spiritual experiences that touched our lives reinforces our faith. Your journal might not be highlighted in some future Church history display, but I can assure you it will be treasured by your children and grandchildren for many generations to come.

Keeping Your Own Records

The principles of record keeping outlined in scripture can also guide you in your individual life (see Alma 37:6–7; Doctrine and Covenants 20:1; 57:13; 78:11). You can organize yourself by making plans to select and care for important records such as:

- Personal journals.
- Certificates of ordinances and achievements.
- Family photographs.
- Stories about yourself and your family.

Manage your records by protecting them from danger, retaining them as long as you need them, and disposing of information that is not essential (see Jacob 3:13; Alma 63:13). You can preserve your personal and family records throughout the generations by storing them in safe places, accessing them with care (see Jacob 4:2; Alma 37:8), and sharing them with your family, such as through FamilySearch.org.

What Records Does the Church Keep?

The Church keeps millions of records of its activities:

- Meetings held
- Local units created
- Missionaries called
- Church buildings constructed
- Temple ordinances performed
- Individuals baptized and confirmed
- Patriarchal blessings given (you can request a copy of your patriarchal blessing through the “My Account and Ward” menu on the Church’s website)
- Priesthood ordinations performed (you can request your priesthood line of authority by emailing lineofauthority@ChurchofJesusChrist.org with “PLA” in the subject line)