

# The Treasure Digging Case File

How a Folk Magic Career Became  
the Blueprint for a Prophet



## Let's Re-examine the Pieces

“When you’re given the presentation on the church, you’re given a **puzzle box** with a picture on the front. You’re told what the history is, and you mash the pieces together, even when they don’t quite fit. **For me**, when **I had that** moment where I had to know, it was like taking that puzzle apart, scattering the pieces on the table, and throwing the **box away** **throwing the box away**. Now, you’re not worried about jamming pieces together. You’re only worried about making sure they fit the way they’re supposed to.”

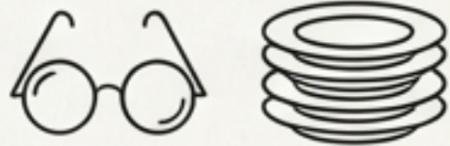
– **Mike, LDS Discussions**

# Why It Starts Here

Before the First Vision story was known, before the Priesthood restoration, there was treasure digging. This practice is the first and most crucial piece of the puzzle because it directly establishes:



- **The Method:** The “seer stone in a hat” technique used for the Book of Mormon translation.



- **The Narrative:** The story of a buried, valuable object guarded by a spirit (Moroni and the Gold Plates).



- **The Worldview:** The folk magic concepts embedded directly into the Book of Mormon text itself.

Understanding treasure digging is essential because, without it, you cannot get from Joseph Smith the farm boy to Joseph Smith the translator.

# Exhibit A: The Practice (Then and Now)

## Modern Apologetic View

Source: [BYU Studies](#)

“In frontier America, seer stones or peep stones were commonly used by lost object finders, people engaged in the widespread practice of lost treasure digging...”

Framed as a common, quirky folk practice.

## Contemporary 18<sup>th</sup> Century View

Source: [Benjamin Franklin, c. 1730s](#)

“There are among us great number of honest artificers and laboring people, who...neglect their business, almost to the ruining of themselves and families...in a fruitless search after imaginary hidden treasure...they conclude that through some mistake...the guardian spirit had power to sink it deeper into the earth...”

Understood as a ruinous and fraudulent scam a century before Joseph Smith began practicing it.



## More Than a Hobby: The Scale of the Digs

Joseph Smith's involvement was neither brief nor casual. Historical records document his participation in dozens of organized digs over a period of at least seven years. These were not small holes dug with a shovel; they were extensive, prolonged mining operations.

**41** Documented treasure digs Joseph Smith was involved with (Source: Mark Elwood).

**Massive Excavations:** Digs like the one at Miner's Hill involved creating large caves and tunnels, requiring organized companies of diggers working for weeks at a time.

c. 1820

1827

# Exhibit B: The Method

“...Joseph, Jr. could see, by placing a stone of singular appearance in his hat, in such a manner as to exclude all light...”

– William Stafford, 1833



“The stone was placed in a hat, in such a manner as to exclude all light, except that which emanated from the stone itself. This light of the stone, he pretended, enabled him to see anything he wished.”  
– Joseph Capron, 1833

Key Takeaway: This is the exact method Joseph Smith would later use to produce the text of the Book of Mormon.

# Exhibit C: The Formula for a Treasure Dig

## The Seer



A charismatic individual with a gift for seeing what others cannot. (e.g., Joseph Smith)

## The Magic Object



A tool, often a special stone, that allows the seer to access hidden knowledge. (e.g., The Seer Stone)

## The Guardian Spirit



A supernatural entity, often the ghost of a person buried with the treasure, who protects it from being retrieved.

## The Buried Treasure



A valuable object (gold, silver) hidden deep in the earth that promises wealth. (e.g., Spanish treasure, Captain Kidd's pirate gold)

# The Rituals: Breaking the 'Charm'

The folk magic rituals required to appease the guardian spirits and secure the treasure were elaborate and dark. Multiple independent accounts confirm that Joseph Smith's treasure digs involved animal sacrifice.

**“Joe Smith told them there was a charm on the pots of money, and if some animal was killed and the blood sprinkled around the place, then they could get it. So they killed a dog and tried this method...”** – Emily M. Austin



**Historian Mark Elwood has identified six separate treasure digs where Joseph Smith was present that included an animal sacrifice.**

# Exhibit D: The Precedent for Failure

Treasure digs always failed. No treasure was ever found. To maintain credibility, the seer needed a way to explain the failure without implicating their own powers. The blame was always shifted to the participants or external forces.

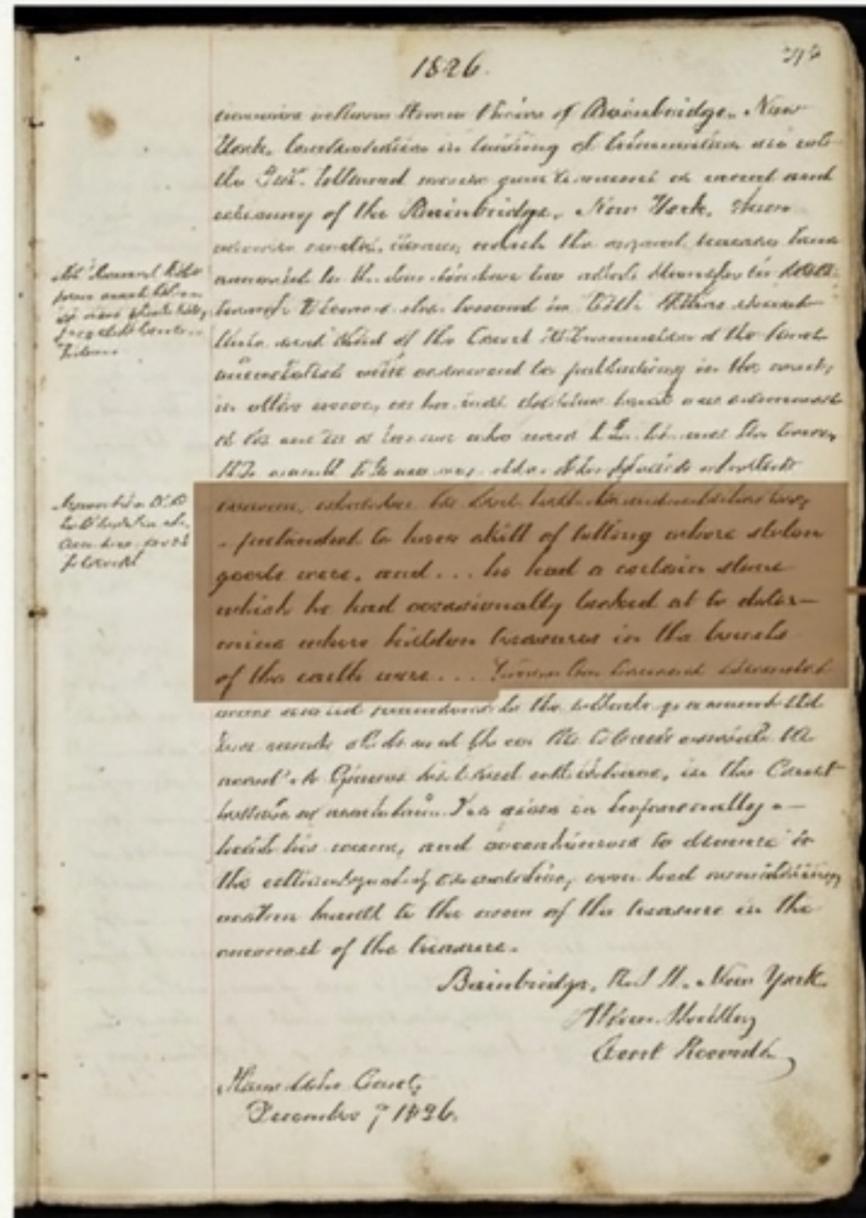
## Common Excuses:

- The incantations were not said correctly.
- Someone spoke a rash word and broke the enchantment.
- A ritual was not followed with exactness.
- The guardian spirit overpowered us and moved the treasure.



**Key Insight:** This creates a pattern of blame reversal, where the followers' lack of perfect obedience is cited as the reason for a failed promise. This tactic reappears throughout church history to explain failed prophecies.

# The Smoking Gun: The 1826 Trial



“...pretended to have skill of telling where stolen goods were, and...he had a certain stone which he had occasionally looked at to determine where hidden treasures in the bowels of the earth were...”

In 1826, Joseph Smith's treasure seeking activities led to legal trouble. He was brought before a court in Bainbridge, New York, on a complaint filed by the nephew of Josiah Stole, who believed his uncle was being defrauded. The charge was being a “disorderly person and an imposter,” specifically for his “glass looking” activities. Witnesses, including his employer Josiah Stole, testified about his methods and repeated failures to find treasure.

# The Verdict and its Repercussions

The docket entry for the case, now published in the church's own Joseph Smith Papers Project, states plainly:

“And therefore the court finds the defendant **GUILTY**.”

“If this court record is authentic, it is the most damning evidence in existence against Joseph Smith.”  
- Hugh Nibley, LDS Scholar (before the record was widely accepted by the church)

For decades, the church and its apologists denied the trial ever happened or that the record was authentic. Its authentication by the *Joseph Smith Papers Project* confirms the historical reality of Joseph's career as a convicted 'glass looker.'

# The Defense: Examining the Apologetics, Part 1

**Argument:** "It was a common part of the culture."

**Rebuttal:** While true that it was culturally known, it was known as a fraudulent activity. As Benjamin Franklin's account shows, it was viewed as a ruinous scam by educated people a hundred years prior. Crucially, it was so well-known as a harmful deception that it was **illegal**, which is precisely why Joseph Smith was arrested and found guilty.

**Argument:** "He only made \$14 a month. It was not a very profitable job." (Joseph Smith, 1838)

**Rebuttal:** This claim is misleading without context.

Monthly Wage Comparison, c. 1827



He was earning over **50% more** than the wage for honest, strenuous farm labor.

# The Defense: Examining the Apologetics, Part 2

**Argument:** “It was a ‘preparatory gospel.’ God was preparing him to use the seer stone for a higher purpose.” (Paraphrased from Richard Bushman)

**Rebuttal:** This defense arises out of necessity to explain uncomfortable facts, but it raises more problems than it solves:

1. It requires one to believe the entire folk magic worldview is literally true (guardian spirits, slippery treasure, etc.).
2. It posits a “**trickster God**” who would use deception and failure as a training method. Why would God prepare his prophet by having him participate in an **illegal, fraudulent activity** that involved **deceiving his followers**?
3. If Joseph had a divine connection through the stone, God could have simply told him, “There is no treasure here.” He never did.

# Deception or Delusion? The Feather in the Ground

While we cannot know what Joseph Smith truly believed, there is evidence he was willing to actively deceive his clients.

## The Josiah Stole Account:

- During a dig, Joseph told Josiah Stole that a treasure chest had a feather on top of it.
- The digging party later uncovered a feather, but the chest had “slipped away.” Stole cited this as proof of Joseph’s powers.
- **The Problem:** A feather buried in the damp soil of upstate New York would decompose and disappear completely within a few months.
- **The Logical Conclusion:** The only plausible way a feather could be “found” is if it were planted there shortly before the dig to keep the paying client invested in the hunt.



# The Final Connection: The Blueprint in the Book

The concepts from Joseph Smith's treasure-digging career were not discarded. They became a core part of the "ancient" record he produced. The Book of Mormon itself describes treasure that behaves exactly as it did in 19th-century folk magic.

**F**rom the Book of Mormon (Helaman 13:31, 35):  
> "And behold, the time cometh that he curseth your riches, that they become **slippery**, that ye cannot hold them... Yea, we have hid up our **treasures**, and they have **slipped away from us**, because of the curse of the land."



The puzzle pieces fit. Treasure digging wasn't the awkward prologue to the Book of Mormon; it was the operating system on which it was written.