

# The Golden Plates: Deconstructing the Narrative.

An evidence-based analysis of the origin story, contrasting the official 1838 account with contemporary treasure-digging folklore.



# To Understand the Story, You Must Understand the Worldview

The events surrounding the golden plates did not occur in a vacuum. They are rooted in the widespread 19th-century tradition of folk magic and treasure digging. This worldview is the essential context for making sense of the narrative.



## Guardian Spirits

Treasures were believed to be protected by spirits who could be appeased or tricked.



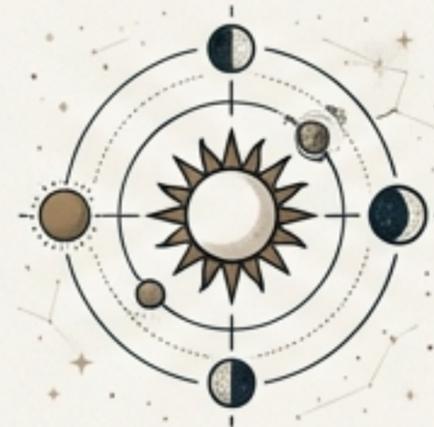
## Seer Stones

Special stones ("peep stones") used by a "seer" to locate hidden treasure.



## Ritual & Enchantment

Specific actions, times, and objects (like black clothing) were required to break enchantments and secure the treasure.



## Equinoxes

Magical days (like the fall equinox) when the veil between worlds was thin and spirits were active.

# 1823: Two Versions of the First Attempt

## The Official 1838 Account

(written 15 years later)

- Joseph finds a stone box with plates, Urim & Thummim, and breastplate.
- He is forbidden by a messenger from taking them.
- Told the time had not yet arrived; must return annually for four years.

“I made an attempt to take them out, but was forbidden by the messenger and was again informed that the time for bringing them forth had not yet arrived...”

— Joseph Smith History, 1838

## Contemporary Accounts

(rooted in folk magic)

- A shock from an ‘invisible power’ prevents him.
- He makes three attempts, a common magical motif.
- Mentions the ‘power of enchantment’ and ‘a thousand like stories.’

“...he made the third attempt with an **increased exertion**, when his strength failed... He had heard of the **power of enchantment in a thousand like stories which held the hidden treasures of the earth...**”

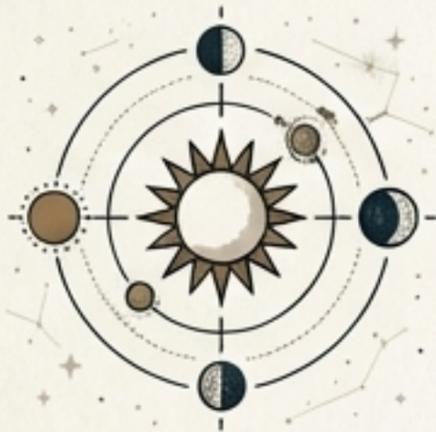
— Oliver Cowdery, Letter to W.W. Phelps

# The First Requirement: “Bring the Right Person”

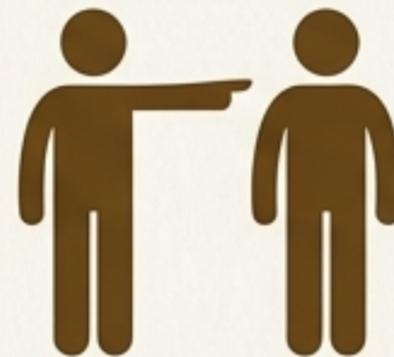
Contemporary accounts reveal a crucial detail omitted from the later, official narrative. The treasure guardian did not simply say “come back later”; it gave Joseph a specific, ritualistic requirement for the next attempt.

“Joseph says, ‘when can I have it?’ The answer was ‘the 22nd day of september next if you bring the right person with you.’ Joseph says, ‘who is the right person?’ The answer was ‘your oldest brother.’”

— Joseph Knight Sr., a faithful associate of Joseph Smith.



The date is again the fall equinox, a key date in folk magic.



The “right person” requirement is a common trope in treasure-digging quests. The designated person is unequivocally identified as Alvin Smith.

# A Prophecy Interrupted, A Grave Disturbed



## The Shocking Aftermath

- Five days after the failed 1824 attempt, Joseph Smith Sr. publishes a notice in the local paper.
- The notice claims rumors are circulating that Alvin's body was "dug up and dissected."
- It states that the family exhumed the grave to prove the body was still there.

*Why would anyone other than the Smith family have a motive to dig up Alvin's body? The most probable explanation is that the family themselves disinterred the body in a desperate attempt to fulfill the angel's command, perhaps by bringing a bone or piece of clothing to the hill. The newspaper notice was likely a ruse to control the resulting rumors.*

# A Rival Seer Changes the Story

Before settling on Emma, Joseph considered another local seer, Samuel Lawrence, as the “right person.” This collaboration backfired, forcing a permanent addition to the golden plates legend.

## The Confrontation at the Hill (as described by Willard Chase)

1. **Lawrence** asks Joseph if he sees anything with the plates. Joseph says no.
2. **Lawrence** tells him to look again. Joseph says no.
3. **Lawrence** insists he look a **third time**, asking, “...see if there is not a large pair of specs with the plates.”
4. Joseph finally looks and “**soon saw a pair of spectacles.**”

## Analysis



- This demonstrates the “power of three” from folk magic.



- It shows Joseph losing control of the narrative; to maintain his status as the primary seer, he must “see” what Lawrence suggests.



- The “spectacles,” a foundational element of the translation story, were not part of the original vision but were retrofitted into the narrative because of this encounter.

# September 22, 1827: A Night of Folk Magic

The successful retrieval of the plates was not a simple event. It was conducted as a classic treasure-digging ritual, filled with elements designed to appease spirits and break enchantments.



## The 'Right Person'

Joseph determines via his seer stone that Emma Hale is now the one.



## The Black Horse & Carriage

He borrows Joseph Knight's black horse, a color associated with magic.



## The Black Clothes

He acquires black clothes and lamp black paint. Neighbors corroborated the requirement for total blackness.



## The Powerful Hour

The attempt is timed for 2:00 AM, considered the "powerful hour" when the equinox hits.

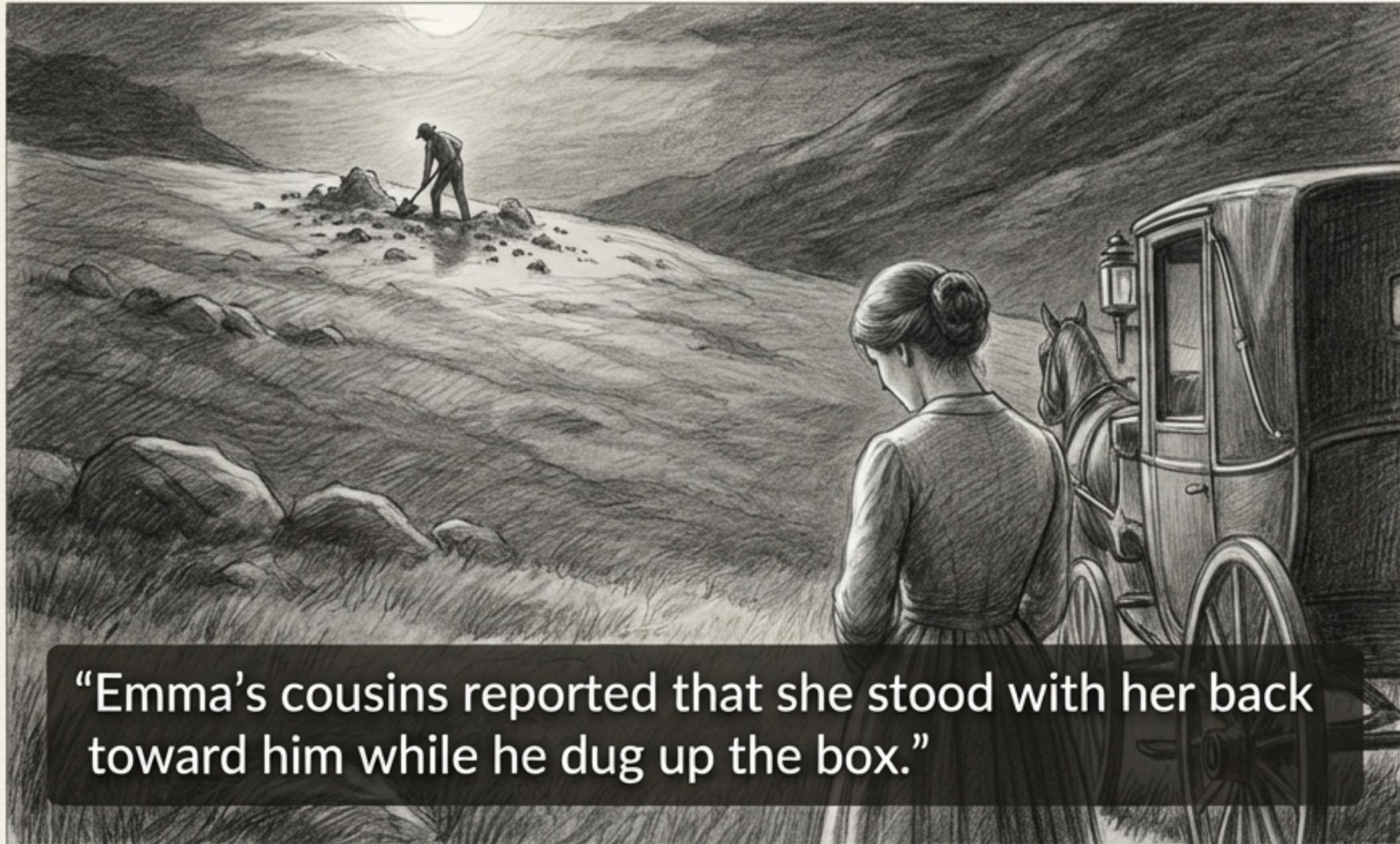


## Controlling the Environment

Joseph sends his father to Samuel Lawrence's house to ensure the rival seer does not interfere.

# The Right Person, But Not the Right Witness

Emma's presence was supposedly essential for the retrieval. Yet, at the critical moment, she was explicitly excluded, raising a fundamental question about her role.



“Emma’s cousins reported that she stood with her back toward him while he dug up the box.”

## Analysis

- If Emma's presence was divinely required, why was she forbidden from looking?
- This action allowed Joseph to maintain complete control over the event with no witnesses.
- It strongly suggests Emma was not “in on a conspiracy.” If she were, her testimony as an eyewitness would have been invaluable. Instead, she was treated as a component of the ritual who must be kept in the dark.

# The Impossible Escape

## The Official Story

Joseph claimed that on his way home, he was attacked three separate times by men with guns. He fought them all off, one-by-one, while running for miles carrying the plates.

*"As he was jumping over a log, a man sprang up ... and gave him a heavy blow with a gun. Joseph turned around and knocked him to the ground, and then ran at the top of his speed ... he was attacked again... he was accosted the third time."* — as recounted by Andrew Hedges, *Ensign* 2001.



## Deconstruction of the Claim



### The Weight

The plates were described as 40-60 lbs. Running for miles with this weight is a feat of superhuman endurance.



### The Injury

Joseph suffered from a permanent limp ("a bad leg") from a childhood surgery, making him an unlikely sprinter.



### The Attackers

Why would three assailants attack sequentially a half-mile apart, rather than coordinating an ambush?



### The Thumb

He claimed to have dislocated his thumb striking an attacker. A more plausible explanation is that he injured it while bending the metal D-rings to assemble a prop set of plates.

# A Sacred Record or an Unfinished Prop?

**The Action:** After his harrowing escape, Joseph does not bring the plates home. Instead, he claims to have hidden them in a hollow log.



**1823:** So sacred they magically return to the box if left unattended.



**1827:** Left in the woods while treasure diggers actively search the area.

## A Plausible Explanation (from historians like Dan Vogel)

- Joseph *had* to perform the retrieval on the fall equinox for it to be credible within the folk magic community.
- However, the physical prop of the plates was not yet complete.
- Hiding them “in a log” provided a necessary excuse to delay bringing them home, giving him time to finish their construction.

# An Oracle of Convenience

**The Scenario:** Joseph Smith Sr. hears that treasure diggers are planning to search the woods for the plates. He sends Emma to warn Joseph.



(according to Lucy Mack Smith)

- Emma arrives in a panic.
- Joseph calmly explains he already knew she was coming because he had looked in his “Urim and Thummim” (his seer stone).
- He looks in the stone again and declares, “the record was perfectly safe for the present.”

## Analysis & Foreshadowing

This is another instance of Joseph using the seer stone to demonstrate supernatural knowledge and control a tense situation.

**Crucial Point:** Remember this event. The seer stone works perfectly to locate a stationary object when Joseph is in full control. This will contrast sharply with its complete failure to locate the 116 lost manuscript pages when he is *not* in control.

# Beyond the Narrative: The Problem of Physicality

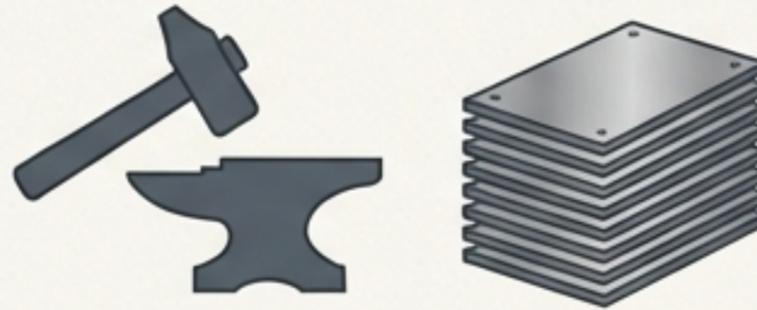
The entire story of the golden plates rests on physical claims that are unsupported by, or directly contradict, the historical and archaeological record.

## Archaeology



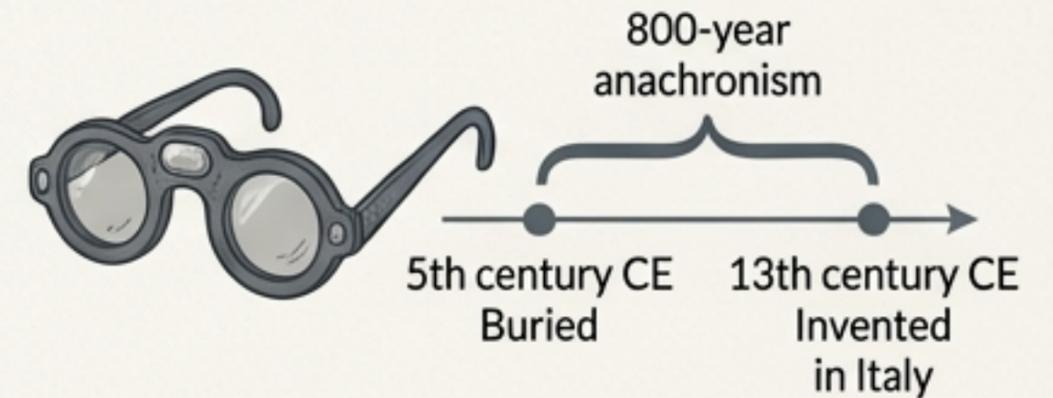
There is no evidence of any ancient American civilization creating lengthy records on metal plates. This practice is anachronistic to the time and place.

## Metallurgy



The level of sophistication required to create, refine, and scribe on hundreds of uniform metal plates is not found in the archaeological record of the peoples described in the Book of Mormon.

## Technology



The “spectacles” are described as being buried in the 5th century CE. However, wearable spectacles were not invented until the 13th century in Italy.

# Data Deep Dive: The Apologists' Best Evidence

In response to the lack of evidence, apologists often point to the “Piergy Plates” (or Pyrgi Tablets) as proof of ancient record-keeping on metal. The church itself alludes to “other ancient metal records” in its “Now You Know” video series.

## The Facts

- **Origin:** Found in Italy, dating to ~500 BCE. (Old World, not the Americas).
- **Size:** Each plate is roughly 7.5 by 3.5 inches.
- **Content:** They contain a dedication to a goddess.

**Total Word Count:** Across all three plates, there are **just 200 words.**



# The Math That Dismantles the Claim

Citing the Pieryg Plates creates a fatal math problem. The density of text on these real-world artifacts shows the physical impossibility of the Book of Mormon existing on a portable set of plates.

## A Tale of Two Stacks

Pieryg Plates



**200 Words**

Book of Mormon Plates  
(at same text density)

**~270,000 Words**



## The Calculation

- Pieryg Rate: 67 words per plate.
- Book of Mormon (Unsealed 1/3): To contain ~270,000 words at this rate would require **2,250 plates**.
- Full Set (including Sealed 2/3): The total number of plates would need to be **6,750**.

**Joseph Smith described a single, portable record. The physical reality of ancient metal engraving demonstrates this is a mathematical impossibility.**

# Two Foundations

The origin story of the golden plates can be understood through one of two foundations.



## Foundation 1: A Divine Account

Requires belief in a narrative that perfectly aligns with the motifs, rituals, and timing of 19th-century treasure-digging folklore. It demands acceptance of significant anachronisms, physical impossibilities, and a story that was repeatedly altered over time.

The evidence does not require a suspension of disbelief; it points to a consistent narrative born from a world of enchanted treasures, guardian spirits, and seer stones.



## Foundation 2: A Folk Magic Account

Views the story as a direct continuation of Joseph Smith's treasure-digging activities. In this framework, every strange detail—the equinox, the rival seers, the failed attempts, the changing requirements, the superhuman escape—is a predictable feature, not a bug. It is a narrative that evolves as circumstances change, culminating in a book.