

The 1832 First Vision account was suppressed for between 11 and 30 years

Summary: The 1832 account of Joseph Smith's First Vision was suppressed by Church leaders for at least 11 years and as many as about 30.

The evidence

LaMar Petersen, an amateur Mormon historian, met with Levi Young (senior President of the First Council of the Seventy) on February 3, 1953, and took these notes:

His curiosity was excited when reading in Roberts' Doc. History reference to "documents from which these writings were compiled." Asked to see them. TOLD TO GET HIGHER PERMISSION. Obtained that permission. Examined documents. Written, he thought, about 1837 or 1838. Was told NOT TO COPY OR TELL WHAT THEY CONTAINED. Said it was a "STRANGE" account of the First Vision. Was put back in vault. REMAINS UNUSED, UNKNOWN.

The "strange" account referred to is the [the 1832 First Vision account](#) (the identity of the document he saw is beyond dispute, as will be obvious from the following sequence of events).

LaMar Petersen later recounted:

... He told us of a "strange account" (Young's own term) of the First Vision, which he thought was written in Joseph's own hand and which had been concealed for 120 years in a locked vault. He declined to tell us details, but stated that it did not agree entirely with the official version. Jesus was the center of the vision, but God was not mentioned. I respected Young's wish that the information be withheld until after his death.

After Levi Young's death in December, 1963, Petersen mentioned the account to Jerald and Sandra Tanner. They wrote to Joseph Fielding Smith asking to see the "strange account", but he refused to let them see it. About that time, the three excised pieces were returned to the journal, and an LDS graduate student, Paul R. Cheeseman, was granted access to the journal and made a transcript of the account (which transcript was then published by the Tanners in 1964 and [Cheeseman in 1965](#)).

What can be surmised with virtual certainty

- The 1832 First vision account was kept in a safe for many years.
- LDS leaders knew what was contained in it, at least as early as 1953 and possibly as early as 1935, about the earliest the account could have been excised from the journal in which it was found.¹
- LDS leaders forbid people from copying the account or talking about it (although they granted access to at least one LDS historian [Petersen] to privately see it).
- LDS leaders suppressed² the account from at least 1953 until 1964.

Why not an earlier dating?

We know that Levi Edgar Young was shown the account before LaMar Petersen. Stan Larson, probably inferring from the Petersen account, surmises:

Some time during the 1940s or early 1950s, Joseph Fielding Smith showed Levi Edgar Young (who was then the senior president of the First Council of the Seventy) this 1832 account of the First Vision.

The statement is given the following footnote:

8. When Joseph Fielding Smith became president of the LDS Church in 1970, the personal safe in his office was moved into the First Presidency's walk-in vault. The exact time that the 1832 account was put into the Joseph Fielding Smith office safe and the date that he showed the history to Levi Edgar Young would probably be found in the Joseph Fielding Smith Collection, catalogued as Ms 4250 at the Church History Library Archives. On December 11, 2012 the writer sent to Richard E. Turley a written request for permission to read the diaries (either photocopies or microfilm) of Joseph Fielding Smith from 1930 to 1954, **but this request was denied**. (emphasis added)

So, dating exactly when Joseph Fielding Smith put the document in the vault and dating when he showed the document to Levi Edgar Young are currently unknown

¹The three leaves containing the "strange" first vision account had been excised from the original journal. The manner in which the excision was performed (i.e., the type of tape used to repair parts of the sloppy excision) means that the excision had to have taken place after 1930 (since that is when cellophane tape was invented), so likely sometime after 1935 when cellophane tape was in widespread use. In addition, the excision **did not follow common/good archival protocol** (i.e., no notes as to why or when the pages were excised). The excision is further evidence that LDS leaders knew that the account was significant and took deliberate steps to avoid it being leaked. In my view, though, the excision simply corroborates the suppression—the suppression is clearly established by LaMar Petersen's notes from 1953.

²I'm defining suppression in this fashion: Church leaders clearly knew what the document was and that it was significant, and they took deliberate steps to avoid that information being leaked to the public.

because the the LDS Church won't allow historians to read Joseph Fielding Smith's diaries from the time period.

If Joseph Fielding Smith understood the significance of the document when he excised it (which seems highly probable), then the suppression of the document began anywhere from the 1930s until 1964. If we assume the mid 1930's for the date of widespread use of cellophane tape (say 1934) then we can bracket the time of suppression: The 1832 First Vision account was suppressed somewhere between 11 and 30 years.

Additional reflections

One is left to wonder how much longer the account would have been suppressed if Petersen had not mentioned the account to the Tanners and the Tanners pressured leaders to release it.

Even with it's publication by the Tanners in 1964 it would be another **6** years before the Church acknowledged the *substance* of the 1832 First Vision account in official material.³

References:

- Stan Larson. Another Look at Joseph Smith's First Vision. Dialogue 2014. ([pdf on dialogue](#), \$1.99)
- [The Case of the Three Torn Pages](#)

³As far as I am aware, the first mention of the idea that Joseph told an account of a single visitor (i.e., the substance of the 1832 account) is in James Allen's April 1970 Improvement Era Article entitled "Eight Contemporary Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision - What Do We Learn from Them?"