

Cuppa Joe | Historic Sites and Vision for the Future | Lach Mackay

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SPEAKERS

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Karin Franklin Peter 00:33

Welcome. This is Cuppa Joe the Project Zion Podcast series about Community of Christ history. And I'm your host, Karin Peter. I'm here with Apostle Loch Mackay, who is also the Director of Historic Sites for Community of Christ. Welcome Lach.

Lachlan Mackay 00:50

Thank you, Karin. Good to be with you.

Karin Franklin Peter 00:53

So it's really nice to have you here. This is a special episode on Cuppa Joe and we have some important things to talk about. So I'm gonna go ahead and turn it over to you.

Lachlan Mackay 01:04

So I just want to share some thoughts on how I am processing the news that we are selling Kirtland Temple and the Joseph Smith Historic Site properties as well as various paintings and manuscripts. This is pretty personal for me, so I hope I can make it through this discussion. My grandmother was Lois Smith Larsen. If that sounds vaguely familiar. It's because she's the one that had the Smith Larson daguerreotype, likely the first photograph of Joseph Smith, gave it to my uncle Dan. So I grew up in eastern Jackson County, Missouri and attended Smith family reunions in Nauvoo and Independence. Before heading off to the University of Missouri, Russian area studies in economics, I thought I was going to work for the government as I finished and it was a really long interview process. And I needed to kill time. So I signed up to participate in Graceland's museum management internship at Nauvoo. And really, for the first time dove into our story that ended up with me not working for the CIA, but instead going to work for Community of Christ. And I spent 15 years literally living in the shadow of Kirtland Temple, and now 18 years living here on the Joseph Smith Historic Site in Nauvoo. So for 33 years, my commute has never been worse than walking across the street to the visitor's center. Basically, my entire adult life has been spent in these places. I met my spouse in the Red Brick Store in Nauvoo. I was ordained to my first priesthood office in Kirtland Temple, I'm likely the only living person that has been ordained in both the Kirtland and Independence Temples. I have almost certainly given more tours of Kirtland Temple than any living person. The Homestead and Mansion House and Nauvoo House, are my ancestral homes. So, this has been extraordinarily difficult emotionally. I thought it might

break me. But intellectually, it is clearly the path forward. I support this decision, despite how much it hurts. The post pandemic world has changed, the needs have never been greater. And as we look to the future, we're making a decision to choose people over property and paper and paintings. It's been a privilege for us to serve as stewards and welcome visitors to these historic and sacred sites for well over a century... 144 years for Kirtland, 106 years in Nauvoo. I care deeply for these places. And I want to ensure that they are appropriately restored and cared for in the future, something we're just not capable of doing anymore. I know that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints shares our passion for these places, and that they have the resources both financial and human necessary to preserve them for many years to come. One of the ways I'm processing this and I might, you know, months or years down the road decide some of these ideas are silly, but I just I'm trying to make sense of this. So one of the ways I'm processing it, is to remember that the most important items in the transaction came to us from the Smith family. Joseph III conveyed Kirtland Temple to us. The Nauvoo properties are the Smith family properties. The paintings came from the Smith family. The New Translation manuscripts came from the Smith family. The Phinney Bible came from the Smith family. So the proceeds from the sale at some level, are an extraordinarily generous gift from them, that will sustain us into the future. Responsibility for messaging at LDS historic sites has shifted in recent years, from the Missionary Department to the History Department. It's going to take some time and although there's still going to be an invitational component at their sites, the interpretation is now significantly more grounded in history, which makes me feel much better about this decision. Continued access to the sights has been agreed upon for an extended period of time. So these are going to remain open to the public, and we'll continue to be able to worship in Kirtland Temple for at least 15 years. And I believe beyond that. I also, of course, have to consider what's happening in context, always history and scripture in context. Christianity in North America and in many other places, is in significant decline. I would say imploding, maybe that's too strong, but I don't know. We've had wonderfully generous, passionate devoted members who have supported these sites with their time, talent, treasure and testimonies. But most are now in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. The base of support is shrinking. We have struggled now for years to recruit enough volunteers, as interpretive and maintenance staff to be able to operate these sites, and a number of our site directors have ended up in the hospital from the stress of trying to keep these places open. The younger generations that are still active, like the larger culture are having far fewer children, which means the pool for interns is much smaller than in generations past. And the same religious and demographic trends that are impacting us are also impacting the Mormons. And as with others, the pandemic accelerated these trends. For the Mormons there are fewer active members in the US that are having fewer children. And the internet and accompanying rise in the inability to understand history in context has for them, because of their approach to history in the past, transformed some of these places, particularly Nauvoo into not faith promoting but faith destroying. That's meant a significant decline in our visitor count at these places in the last 20 years. And again, the cancelling of the Palmyra/ Hill Cumorah pageant a couple of years ago by the Church of Jesus Christ, has amplified that decline. That pageant drove our Kirtland visitor count, used to get a third of our annual total in July because of that pageant. So the number of visitors has been dropping for 20 years and has really declined significantly over the last few as we've tried to come back from the pandemic. So why does that matter? Well, about 20 years ago, we began to offset the decline in Community of Christ donors with the implementation of preservation fees for those touring these sites. And that has generated anywhere from 10 to 40% of the cost of running the sites depending on the year. We've also increasingly depended on the financial support of the Community of Christ Historic

Sites Foundation, and have been asking them to give in recent years at levels that are simply not sustainable for them. With a significant decline in visitors and accompanying drop in preservation fees, and then add in pandemic driven inflation and climate driven property insurance spikes. Our funding model for the site's is, it's just broken. I apparently inherited Joseph Smith III's pragmatism. I recognize the world has changed. I don't like it. But it is our current reality. And I intend to make the best of it as we move forward. One of our volunteers a number of years ago, ran across an account of Fred M. Smith visiting Palmyra in 1927. In the "Saints Herald", it was a great trip. He visited Miner's Cave, in addition to all the major sites, but he had this to say. The Mormons during that time were currently in the process of negotiating to purchase Hill Cumorah and they already owned the Smith Farm and so somebody asked him how he felt about the Mormon presence there. His answer is kind of long, but I think it's really interesting in this context, here's what he said. "How did I feel seeing it in the hands of the Mormons (meaning the Smith Farm), I think I hear someone ask. Well, one thing is quite certain, even if I had personally desired to own it, for various obvious reasons, I could not. If the church had proposed buying it, or the Hill, or any other farm around there, I should have opposed it. The land we need lies much nearer Independence. And I know of no one who will take better care of the farm or the hill or other historic spots than they may (than will our ecclesiastic cousins from Utah), and I'd much rather see them have it, or than to see those, than to see those places in the hands of those who would be disposed to collect fees from visitors. [That's kind of funny, because of course, we now do that.] But I'm glad the Utah people have the farm, and they're giving it their usual good care. And I'm hoping they may be successful in securing the Hill. It will be a guarantee that its beauties will be preserved and enhanced, and that it will be accessible to the public. In the meantime, I'm glad that we are buying land in the regions roundabout with our eyes to the future. The Utah people can afford to spend money on these Far Eastern landmarks. And we cannot. Our burdens and responsibilities near home demand that all our resources be concentrated there." That's Fred M. in 1927. Obviously, some things have changed since then. But I, for some strange reason, find some comfort in those words. So, before I start talking about what I think Historic Sites and church history might look like in the future, I just wanted to share some of those reflections.

Karin Franklin Peter 11:40

I appreciate that. I appreciate you sharing that from part of your personal story. I think listeners who have had to dispose of family properties, because of the death of a loved one, or health, or age reasons can understand some of the family grief that takes place even as they're doing it knowing it's the best thing for everyone. Yeah, so let's, let's hear what you have to say about what this means.

Lachlan Mackay 12:12

So, despite the pain, I'm incredibly excited about the future. Of both Community of Christ and of our Historic Sites, and church history in general. So in about 2010, as the Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation was preparing for a World Conference, we were pushing on the First Presidency to give us one of the evenings at Conference for a hymn festival. You know, these has been done for decades, much beloved hymn festivals, historic hymn festivals. And the Presidency pushed back. And they wouldn't give us a night. And they instead said, "We think it will be more effective not to do one night of church history, separate and stand alone, that rather to intentionally integrate church history into the whole experience." I don't think we liked that idea. But we had no choice. And that's what we did. And I think it was one of the most successful conferences that the Historic Sites Foundation has

had. And since then we have built on that model. It just works so much better. You know, we had church history giants, those life size cutouts of figures from church history, spread throughout the Temple and Auditorium with interpretive information. And we had materials in each daily bulletin, and we had Joseph Smith III, or maybe John Horner, as Joseph III up there with the Plano pulpit that every church president had spoken from. It just was so much more effective to integrate the history. And I think that's an important lesson moving forward. We almost have farmed out church history to these sites, and not really integrated into the life of the church. And that is our task going forward. And that is the Presidency's request of the Foundation and of our Historic Sites staff going forward. So that's what we're going to be focusing on. We will continue the Alma Blair internships. But the focus will not be Kirtland and Nauvoo. We hope to focus on the Archives Museum, Heritage Plaza there at the Independence Temple, as well as on Liberty Hall. There are so many stories from Joseph III in the Lamoni period that can propel us forward in mission. But we have not done a great job of mining those stories and sharing them with the church. We are really emphasizing and have already started this, rebuilding our Oral History Program, which staffing cuts have negatively impacted. And not only are we going to focus on collecting more oral histories from church leaders, but we need to develop a communication plan to let scholars and members know when those interviews become available so that they don't just sit on a shelf somewhere. And we, we are going to be much more intentional about extending those not just to general officers, but to international leaders and members, as well. We are planning on developing further the Church History and Sacred Story Team. Because we have been stretched so thin at times, because of the needs of the sites, it's been very difficult to put the time into that team that it needs. So we're firing that up again. And our initial focus is going to be on Section 116 and coming up with some recommendations for the presidency to consider in advance of the next World Conference on how we might better provide context for that section on ordaining black men, in 1865. And we also want to turn our attention to international Historic Sites, we're not going to start buying properties and building things. It might be as simple as a website with maps of important places around the world, not places that we in the US decide are important for those people, but that they decide aren't important. One of the first that we hope to do something with this Tubuai in French Polynesia, where Addison Pratt and other missionaries landed and in fact opened the church in French Polynesia. It's also increasingly clear that we need to provide support for the church in, in learning again, how to think historically, something that has been lost in this culture. And there are specific resources I think we can develop to help people consider sources and you know, is it, is it somebody who was there? Is it firsthand? Is it secondhand? Is it recorded at the time? Is it 30 years later? What I, what I think is the most interesting criteria, maybe is dissimilarity. If somebody is saying something, it's a historical source, and they're saying something, it's not in their best interest to say, it's probably more likely true. Just some tips like that, that will get people started, again, thinking historically, Roger Rose, our Kirtland Site Director now has been working for a year or more on a spiral curriculum for basically first grade through senior high church history curriculum. So you're introduced at very basic levels to some of these topics, that each year you start drilling down. And so as it becomes familiar, it's integrated. I think that will be really important going forward and we plan to keep that moving. Our hope is to partner with things like the John Whitmer Historical Association to fund Awards for Best Community of Christ focused papers on not just 19th, but 20th and 21st century history. We need to spend time redeveloping and reimagining the temple Museum in Independence. We have an amazing collection of artifacts that have really important stories connected to them. We need to focus on and caring for and understanding that collection better. And then finally, because these are only initial

thoughts, I'm going to say, but final initial thoughts. My hope is to strengthen our partnership and engagement with Project Zion Podcast Cuppa Joe series. So my hope is that you'll be hearing a lot more from our church history community in the months and years to come.

Karin Franklin Peter 19:02

We will look forward to that Lach. We've enjoyed our partnership with Historic Sites Foundation as well. That will be one more avenue of helping share our sacred story not just where it was, but where we are and how we're moving forward. So any other thoughts about the particular happenings in Historic Sites, Church History, Sacred Story?

Lachlan Mackay 19:26

Nope. An element that I think is particularly important to me, the Smith family Cemetery in Nauvoo is not included. And we will be gifting it, my hope is to the Smith Family Foundation. I serve on that board, as does Julie Smith. They fund the maintenance of the cemetery now. And so the family will eventually end up with ownership of the Smith Family Cemetery here in Nauvoo, which I feel good about.

Karin Franklin Peter 19:57

Excellent. So the extended Smith family cemetery in Vermont is owned by Is it the Congregationalists? Or is it the UCC? Do you know?

Lachlan Mackay 20:09

I do you not know. Is this the one that there was just a marker placed in?

Karin Franklin Peter 20:13

I'm not sure about that. But a friend of the church Rock Fremont, who our listeners know from Project Zion, I mentioned it, he was doing something that ran across that tidbit, he's like, "Hey, my denomination actually owns the extended the Smith family cemetery in Vermont, how wonderful that we're partners in this. And I was thrilled because we don't always get to hear those wonderful notes of ecumenical relationships in regard to the Smith family.

Lachlan Mackay 20:40

So I don't know that story. So I would love to talk to Rock and understand which cemetery that is.

Karin Franklin Peter 20:45

Okay. Excellent. All right. So are there any other aspects of this you think people might be wondering about or questions they might be asking and where you might direct them for some support or answers.

Lachlan Mackay 20:58

The church I believe, is going to be putting together services of lament, as well as a number of resources. To help people process this news, they will be making those available, I'm sure online, soon. There'll be a number of videos coming out. What I think is going to be fascinating to watch is that, for some of our members, they don't even know that we have these places, or these things. And for others, this is just going to be devastating news. And so my hope is that no matter how you feel about the

news, you'll be able to take care of each other. And help us through this critically important step on the path to the future of the church.

Karin Franklin Peter 21:47

Always, with that eye to the future, the gift, the blessing that we leave for those who come after us. We make difficult choices in order to make that stability happen for them, and to continue to share our message in the world of what it is to share the peace of Jesus Christ. So thank you for sharing this with us. Your personal story, as well as your thoughts on how we move forward interpreting our sacred story, and how we make it part of our discipleship as we've done with other aspects of our faith. So, do you have any closing thought or quote or anecdote you'd like to leave us with? Sometimes you have some lovely family comments to make? Or maybe just a blessing, however you'd like to close your thoughts today?

Lachlan Mackay 22:38

Yeah, I think maybe just a reminder that we don't have to own these places for them to be important and to have value, and that they're still going to be open to the public, we're still going to visit them. You know, I think about the congregation's I work with that can no longer maintain big buildings, they're small congregations. And there are occasions where an individual or a group will buy the building, and welcome the congregation to keep meeting in the space to keep using the space. All the benefits. None of the cost. And that's what's happening here. I think that, you know, at some level, it's a pride thing. You know, most of us are too busy to visit these places. I very much appreciate the folks who have volunteered through the years. But most of us do not have the time to support as volunteers these places. It's a pride thing that hurts, but I'm okay with that. I think it makes us to be humbled a little bit is not a bad thing. As much as it is uncomfortable.

Karin Franklin Peter 23:54

It is. And yet again, we look towards the future. So, thank you look for sharing your vision of hope going forward, as well as your personal journey to this point. We look forward to hearing more on Cuppa Joe on where we're going. And I'm looking forward to some continued podcasts from the Reorganization as we continue our journey together with Historic Foundation and Historic Sites. So, thank you for being with us. And thanks to our listeners. This is Cuppa Joe, part of Project Zion Podcast. I'm Karin Peter here with Lach Mackay. Thanks for listening.