This volume is a work of narrative nonfiction based on more than five hundred historical sources. Utmost care has been taken to ensure its accuracy. The early Latter-day Saints wrote many letters, journals, newspaper articles, and autobiographies. As a result, much of Church history between 1815 and 1846 is remarkably well documented. Readers should not assume, however, that the narrative presented here is perfect or complete. The records of the past, and our ability to interpret them in the present, are limited.

All sources of historical knowledge contain gaps, ambiguities, and biases. They often convey only their creator’s point of view. Consequently, witnesses of the same events experience, remember, and record them differently, and their diverse perspectives enable varied ways of interpreting history. The challenge of the historian is to assemble known points of view and piece together an accurate understanding of the past through careful analysis and interpretation.

Saints is a true account of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based on what we know and understand at the present time from existing historical records. It is not the only possible telling of the Church’s sacred history, but the scholars who researched, wrote, and edited this volume know the historical sources well, used them thoughtfully, and documented them in the endnotes and list of sources cited. Readers are invited to evaluate the sources themselves, many of which have been digitized and linked to the endnotes. It is probable that the discovery of more sources, or new readings of existing sources, will in time yield other meanings, interpretations, and possible points of view.

The narrative in Saints draws on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources contain information about events from those who witnessed them firsthand. Some primary sources, like letters and journals, were written at the time of the events they describe. These contemporaneous sources reflect what people thought, felt, and did in the moment, revealing how the past was interpreted when it was the present. Other primary sources, like autobiographies, were written after the fact. These reminiscent sources reveal what the past came to mean to the writer over time, often making them better than contemporary sources at recognizing the significance of past events. Since they rely on memory, however, reminiscent sources can include inaccuracies and be influenced by the author’s later understandings and beliefs.

Secondary historical sources contain information from people who did not witness the events described firsthand. Such sources include later family histories and academic works. This volume is indebted to many such sources, which proved valuable for the broader contextual and interpretive work they provided.

Every source in Saints was evaluated for credibility, and each sentence was repeatedly checked for consistency with the sources. Lines of dialogue and other quotations come directly from historical sources, word for word. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in direct quotations have been silently modernized for clarity. In rare instances, more significant modifications, like shifting from the past tense to present tense or standardizing grammar, have been made to quotations to improve readability. In these cases, endnotes describe the changes made. Choices about which sources to use and how to use them were made by a team of historians, writers, and editors who based decisions on both historical integrity and literary quality.

Lucy Mack Smith’s memoir, for instance, is a vital source for the early chapters of this volume. Lucy composed it between 1844 and 1845 at age sixty-nine, with the help of Martha Jane Knowlton Coray and Martha’s husband, Howard. As a reminiscent source, Lucy’s history is not free of errors, but it has been found to be generally reliable. It is used judiciously in this volume and cited mostly for events Lucy witnessed. For more about this history, see “Lucy Mack Smith” at saints.lds.org.

Some antagonistic sources were used to write this volume and are cited in the notes. These sources were primarily used to characterize early opposition to the Church. Though largely hostile to Joseph Smith and the Church, these documents sometimes contain details that were not recorded elsewhere. Some of these details were used when other records confirmed their general accuracy. Facts from these antagonistic records were used without adopting their hostile interpretations.

As a narrative history written for a general audience, this volume presents a foundational history of the Church in a coherent, accessible format. While drawing on the techniques of popular storytelling, it does not go beyond information found in historical sources. When the text includes even minor details, such as facial expressions or weather conditions, it is because these details are found in or reasonably deduced from the historical record.

To maintain the readability of the narrative, the volume rarely addresses challenges in or to the historical record in the text itself. Rather, it relegates such source-based discussions to topical essays on saints.lds.org. Readers are encouraged to consult these essays as they study Church history.