Mormon Masculinity: Changing Gender Expectations in the Era of Transition from Polygamy to Monogamy, 1890–1920

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The 1907 edition of *Improvement Era*, the magazine of the Latter-day Saints’ Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA), carried a series of articles warning Latter-day Saints about an impending crisis in Utah. The series was written by Dr E. G. Gowans, a judge of the Juvenile Court system in Utah, who warned that the future of the state’s young men was at stake. As an officer of the court, Gowans could see the problem all too well and described the pattern that he observed. First, between the ages of twelve and fourteen, boys began to enjoy truancy. Then, Gowans argued, ‘comes a group of offenders who are guilty of malicious mischief, incorrigibility and trespass, the maximum age being about 14 years: fifteen is the age for larceny, vagrancy, assaults, and disorderly conduct. Burglary and intoxication follow at sixteen, and at seventeen fornication and other sexual crimes’.¹ Another ‘leading educator’ writing for the magazine saw the progression a little differently. He claimed ‘that the boy who smokes at seven will drink whiskey at fourteen, take morphine at twenty-five, and wind up with cocaine and the rest of narcotics at thirty’.²

Even discounting the panicked tone of the two men’s diagnoses, one thing is clear: during the period from 1890 to 1920, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) perceived a crisis in the lives of their boys. That sense of crisis lay at the surface of an even deeper cultural upheaval taking place within Mormondom. Tensions with religious outsiders and the US government over the practice of polygamy had led to a stand-off in the late 1880s. If the Saints wanted to continue to practise their religion and maintain ownership of church property (including the temple that stood at the centre of their worship), they had to give up polygamy, the religious practice that distinguished them as obedient followers of an ancient marital pattern, which they believed was ordained by God. For about half a century, the practice of polygamy had affirmed their belief that they were part of God’s chosen people.³ In 1890, the Mormon prophet Wilford Woodruff made an official declaration that Mormons were abandoning the practice of polygamy. The practice continued underground for a time and it ultimately took the next three decades before the practice ended in Mormon culture.⁴ Thus, the period from 1890 to 1920 has been called by historians of Mormonism the ‘era of transition’.

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During this transitional period, the LDS authorities emphasised the moral systems they shared with their Protestant contemporaries while maintaining their sense of distinctiveness. With the transition from polygamy to monogamy, church members had to construct a new model for understanding marriage, family and sexuality.\(^5\) When Mormons were forced to discontinue their plural sexual practices and embrace the monogamous heterosexuality that was normative within wider (primarily Protestant) society, they were also forced to reconstruct their notions of masculinity.

Prior to 1890, Mormon masculinity had revolved around two pillars rooted in divine revelation: the priesthood and the practice of polygamy. Even Mormon men with only one wife saw polygamy as central to their identity. The idea that the group was carrying on a divinely ordained practice supported the sense that the practice itself made the group eligible for Zion. The new Mormon masculinity that developed from 1890 to 1920 was also rooted in divine revelation, but consisted of four pillars: a changed notion of priesthood; adherence to the Word of Wisdom (a divinely revealed health code that prohibits alcohol and tobacco use); an increased expectation that young LDS men would go on missions (which was understood as the time a Mormon man would stand against the wider culture); and monogamous heterosexuality. On these four pillars, Mormons constructed a new man who, they asserted, was an ideal American citizen.

At least to the reading public, the new ideal Mormon man was portrayed as an obedient follower who abstained from alcohol and tobacco, married one woman and entered into a career in which he would excel. These men had much in common with the ideals of their white, middle-class, Protestant contemporaries. Part of what remained unique about Mormon masculinity, when compared to masculinity in wider US culture, was the priesthood, which was given to all pious adult males in the LDS church. This position was predicated upon personal worthiness, including an adherence to the Word of Wisdom, one of the newfound markers of Mormon distinction. The new Mormon male was fit, spiritually and physically, and ready to engage both the religious and secular worlds. His body represented the new Mormon image of an ideal American citizen – a prosperous economic being, a physically able and monogamous man, and a worthy member of the church. In order to become more American, Mormons had to re-make their men.

Because it was in large part prompted by outsider actions, all of this refashioning occurred slowly. Latter-day Saints gave up polygamy not because it had been deemed immoral or ungodly, but rather because the US government would not tolerate its continued practice.\(^6\) Consequently, Latter-day Saints retained many of the values they fostered in a polygamous culture. Changes initially occurred on the surface, as part of a new public face for the outside world. These changes appeared in prescriptive literature before they seeped into the hearts and daily practices of average Mormons. Thus, prescriptive literature offers a unique window onto the beginnings of cultural change.

In print, Latter-day Saints offered up their newly refashioned masculinity for outsider scrutiny and insider consideration. Therefore our analysis focuses primarily on *Improvement Era*, the LDS journal used to teach young men in the YMMIA, and secondarily on *Young Woman’s Journal*, the equivalent publication for young girls.\(^7\) As the primary sources for the instruction of young men and women during this period, these journals provide a useful lens on Mormon authorities’ articulation...
of the new ideals of masculinity. During this period, *Improvement Era* served as an official avenue of communications for the General Authorities of the church to advise the priesthood quorums, revitalise auxiliary movements and provide young men with standards for living.⁸ In order to tease out the messages that were uniquely geared towards refashioning masculinity, we also examined the literature that was directed towards young LDS women. The different foci of the two journals helped us to identify how men in particular came to embody Mormon distinctiveness, while women were even more closely aligned with the mainstream.

**Mormon masculinity and non-Mormon responses prior to 1890**

In order to explain this shift, we must describe Mormon masculinity prior to 1890. It was in Utah, isolated from virtually all external cultural forces, that a distinctly Mormon masculinity coalesced around the twin pillars of polygamy and the priesthood. However, the ingredients of that distinct notion of masculinity existed prior to the move to Utah and were instituted through the divine revelations of Joseph Smith, Jr, the first prophet and leader of the Mormon movement. The central pillar upon which Mormons originally constructed their notion of a distinct masculinity was through the office of the priesthood, which was endowed on all worthy Mormon men. The priesthood is the one pillar which was (and remains) central to the construction of Mormon masculinity. According to Mormonism, the priesthood is the ‘power to act in God’s name’ and is made up of two types: the Aaronic (or ‘lesser’ priesthood) which allows a man to administer the sacraments, collect offerings and assist in teaching; and the Melchizedek (or ‘greater’ priesthood) which allows him to give blessings, ordain and teach others.⁹ Mormons believed that these offices were the offices God had given to the Jews many millennia ago. They asserted that their prophet, Joseph Smith, had also been given the authority of these priesthood offices because he knew God’s will and was the first man for thousands of years who had reinstituted God’s original religion on earth. Thus, the central pillar of a distinctly Mormon masculinity was thought to be divinely revealed to the prophet of Mormonism. When the church was forced to change in 1890, it was this central practice that allowed the community the flexibility to shift its notion of masculinity successfully.

The second pillar of masculinity that developed prior to 1890 related to the sexual expectations for the male priesthood-holder’s body. In 1852, the church’s president, Brigham Young, publicly announced that, in an 1840s revelation, God had explained to Joseph Smith the importance of plural wifery (the Mormon term for polygamy). The official revelation that instituted polygamy, now called *Doctrine and Covenants* 132, claimed that there had been practitioners of polygamy throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition; the revelation listed Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and Solomon. Prior to 1852, church leaders, including Joseph Smith, had been practising polygamy for almost two decades. Despite that fact, numerous church members still balked upon first learning of the revelation. Nonetheless, those who could not embrace the practice left the group, and those who could embrace it remained and eventually took it up as a central religious practice. Thus the practice became an important way of distinguishing insiders from outsiders, as well as marking out the obedient and devout.

Only a minority of church members were members of polygamous families, with estimates ranging from between 20 and 30 per cent. Among church leaders, the
percentages were quite different: from 1845 to 1888 only 31.8 per cent participated in monogamous marriages.\textsuperscript{10} Although polygamy was only practised by a numerical minority, that minority had the ability to direct the affairs of the church, including the power to interpret revelation. Thus, polygamy continued to function as a way of marking the holy status of all community members.

Within Mormonism, the majority of marriages were one of two types. The first were those marriages that were valid ‘for time’, which meant that they ended at death and that the married couple would not be married in heaven. The revelation said these individuals would be ‘appointed angels in heaven... they cannot be enlarged, but remain separately and singly, without exaltation... and from henceforth are not gods, but are angels of God’\textsuperscript{11} Participating in this lesser form of marriage meant that the marriage occurred only in this life. Those who participated in the second type, celestial marriage (usually called marriage ‘for time and for all eternity’), which could be between one man and one wife or one man and multiple wives, were promised in the revelation that they would ‘be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them’.\textsuperscript{12} Those who participated in this holiest of marriage vows were promised a place in the highest levels of heaven where they would have the ability to be eternally united with their families and those families would be eternally enlarged.\textsuperscript{13}

Participants in plural wifery served as physical markers of one of the community’s most sacred spiritual beliefs. Like the priesthood, polygamy acted to link Mormon men with ancient biblical leaders and allowed them the possibility of becoming men whose progeny would be endless. While having the priesthood was not immediately obvious to outsiders, men who practised polygamy were most definitely an external sign of God’s spiritual favour upon the Mormon community. It was within this system that masculinity was defined. As practitioners of plural marriage, Mormon men were the carriers of religious piety and the primary bearers of Mormon distinctiveness. Their actions in this life signified to members of the community their probable status in the next. Mormons understood that very distinctiveness to be a sign of divine favour. The problem was that non-Mormons saw it as a sign of intolerable difference.

The treatment of the church by government officials, Protestant clergy and laity, and reform leaders grew increasingly harsh throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Hailed alongside slavery as a ‘twin relic of barbarism’ plaguing American culture, reformists believed that polygamy had to be eradicated by any means necessary.\textsuperscript{14} Though numerous acts and court decisions supported attempts to define Mormons as un-American and un-Christian, perhaps the most indicative of the intentions of non-Mormon Americans can be seen in the 1879 Supreme Court decision in Reynolds v. United States. Reynolds sought protection under the First Amendment, arguing that his right to religious freedom protected him from persecution for practising polygamy.\textsuperscript{15} In the Reynolds decision, the Supreme Court voiced a unanimous decision that reflected the feelings of many Americans about religious freedom: ‘Laws are made for the government of actions, and while they cannot interfere with mere religious belief and opinions, they may with practices’.\textsuperscript{16} That is, Mormons could believe in continuous revelation, but they could not put into practice new revelations deemed necessary for their spiritual wellbeing (that is, polygamy) if those revelations went against American norms.

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Throughout the nineteenth century, the actions against the LDS church, both legal and social, reflected the opinions voiced in 1879. In 1862, Congress had passed the Morrill Act, an act that outlawed bigamy in US territories, limited the power of Utah’s territorial legislature and denied religious institutions the right to own property worth more than $50,000. Although this legislation theoretically placed severe restrictions on the LDS church, it had little actual impact on the lives of individuals in Utah. Distracted by far more immediate concerns in the 1860s, US government officials were unable to uphold the Morrill Act’s restrictions.

However, as reconstruction attempts in the post-Civil War south began to require less attention, the LDS church in Utah territory began to receive more. When the LDS church attempted to get the Morrill Act repealed, Congress refocused its energies on outlawing the practice of polygamy. The first step in this process was the Poland Act of 1874, which put Utah’s courts under federal charge in an attempt to solidify federal power in the territory. By the 1880s, the government’s attention zeroed in on strategies for enforcing its policies. In 1882, the Edmunds Act created the legal classification of ‘unlawful cohabitation’, which made it much easier for the government to prosecute those who practised polygamy. The act also specified that anyone who had been convicted of polygamy could not serve on a jury in such cases. The Edmunds–Tucker Act of 1887 allowed plural wives to testify against their husbands, disinherited the children of polygamous unions, and made cohabitation and unrecorded marriages felonious.

The series of laws regularised marriage in Utah, but ‘most devastating to the church’, Sarah Gordon concludes, was the abolition of the church’s corporation, because ‘ownership of real property was limited to a total of no more than $50,000’. The Supreme Court upheld the legality of seizure of the church’s property in the 1890 *Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints v. United States* ruling. In effect, the US government outlawed the religious practice of polygamy and attempted to force compliance with the law by seizing the property of the church.

And so, the Latter-day Saints were confronted with a seemingly impossible situation. They had to forego the practice that made them a distinct people or surrender their temple, their property and their way of life. The challenge posed by outside forces threatened the very heart of Mormon identity. In response, Mormons developed a new notion of masculinity that outwardly brought them closer to their Protestant contemporaries while still maintaining an internal sense of distinctiveness.

**Muscular Christianity**

In order to understand Mormon masculinity in relation to Protestant masculinity, it is necessary to describe briefly what historians and cultural critics have long referred to as ‘muscular Christianity’, a shorthand phrase for the changing relationships between gender and religion in white Protestantism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Muscular Christianity was an attempt by mainstream Protestant leaders to bring men back to the church. It was in large part a response to the idealised gender models set forth in the early nineteenth century that associated women with the home, religion, piety and morality, and men with business and politics. Men were responsible for the expansion of the new nation and urban growth. They were associated with traits
like independence, autonomy, control of labour and production.\textsuperscript{25} This complementary gender model contrasted masculinity and femininity, placing responsibility for piety and morality in the hands of women.

White Protestant women took the responsibilities assigned to them very seriously, and used their status as bearers of morality to propel themselves into the public realm of politics. They interpreted the notion that they were moral caretakers of the family to mean that they were also responsible for the morality of the wider community. In response, some expressed concerns that women were stepping out of their assigned roles, and that America had lost its ‘frontier’, that fictional wilderness space where American men became men.

Religion was, in part, understood as an antidote to the perceived sissification of America’s men. Along with male fraternal lodges and boys’ clubs, the church was seen as a place where men should be able to go to have their masculinity reinforced. The problem was that men were not going to church. A YMCA survey conducted in 1910 concluded that only a third of churchgoers were men.\textsuperscript{26} How then were religious leaders to get men back into church and resolve what they perceived as a ‘crisis’ of masculinity? The answer was to return Christianity to its manly roots. This ‘return’ was predicated on the idea that in the early nineteenth century the Protestant church had been ‘feminised’.\textsuperscript{27} Protestant leaders created a narrative of a church that had been overrun by women and emotion, one that had come to focus too much on the heart at the expense of the head. In order to counteract that perceived feminisation, Protestant leaders began to celebrate Jesus as a ‘man’s man’, someone who participated in the political system, was successful in the economic order and a model of morality. In describing Jesus this way, these leaders attempted to realign piety and morality with masculinity, thereby Christianising the economic and political systems in American culture and reclaiming both church and state for men. Ministers asserted that being a Christian man comprised character, care of the community and compassion.\textsuperscript{28} In this way, the scope of Christian masculinity expanded into a blend of religion, politics and business.

Protestant church leaders focused their attempts to masculinise religion on young boys. They sought to create youth groups and boys’ clubs (including Boy Scout troops) that would teach Christian boys how to be Christian men. Protestant leaders believed they could create rugged individuals who were independent, rational and pious. It is within this same context that the new Mormon masculinity developed.

**The new Mormon man in a secular world**

In the realm of prescriptive literature, Mormon men were taught that, in order to succeed, they had to be prepared to excel in the ‘secular’ world of non-believers. Mormon masculinity was now read in relationship to, rather than over and against, American Protestant masculinity. In the LDS church’s transition into the twentieth century, church leaders wanted to prepare their men for achievement. At each stage in a man’s life, from adolescence (when he was trained in the Boy Scouts) through young adulthood (when he had to shape himself as an economic being), the church provided instruction. In this way, it attempted to keep young men active, thereby ensuring that the church was an important institution in their lives.
The first step, of course, was being prepared. Not long after the Boy Scouts of America programme began in 1910, Mormons adopted it into the YMMIA agenda as another part of their solution for forming young men. This merger blended patriotism, religion and wholesome endeavours, all the while contributing to the solution of young wayward Mormon boys through character-building experiences. Within American society, the popularity of the scouting movement grew out of the fears of middle-class parents that their boys needed protection from the temptations of the city and modernisation. Out-boy-scouting its Protestant contemporaries, the LDS church caught the wave of ‘making men’ that rapidly swept America. In so doing, it took another step towards assimilating with mainstream America, moulding their men to look like other middle-class Protestant men.

Scouting took root after a British career soldier, Robert Baden-Powell, developed a training programme for boys as a response to the ‘boy problem’ in Britain. In 1908, Baden-Powell published Scouting for Boys, a text that suggested military principles as a way of guiding young boys. That same year, an organisation was inaugurated which was based upon Scouting for Boys and focused on instilling in young boys such characteristics as loyalty to country, allegiance to God, hard work, individualism and honesty. The Boy Scout programme quickly became the answer to the question of wayward boys.

By April 1911, Mormon leaders heralded the principles of the Boy Scouts of America programme and encouraged young Mormon readers of Improvement Era to join. Estimates claim that Latter-day Saints accounted for 18 per cent of the youths enrolled in church-based scouting units within the US. One Era author declared, ‘The spirit of the organisation seems to be character-building by acquiring ability to do common things, rather than book learning or book education. It encourages out-door life and has a dash in it of patriotism’. Another author suggested that the Boy Scouts and the YMMIA would together help to channel the energy of boys from gang activity to attitudes of respect and discipline. Thus, from the beginning, the Boy Scouts programme helped address the Mormon ‘boy problem’ and encouraged patriotism through American values.

In the Boy Scouts, LDS leaders found a way to weave their own Mormon stories into their newfound patriotism. The mytho-heroic stories of the LDS pioneer trek to Utah complemented the American frontier stories of making men recounted to young scouts. It was in the West, the American story went, that men were made, and the LDS church had ready-made stories of frontierspeople carving a civilisation, ordained by God, out of the wilderness. In recreating these stories, Mormon boys were taught that Mormon men were the epitome of American masculinity.

Despite praising the scouting programme as early as 1911, the LDS church was not officially given its charter number to assume membership of the Boy Scouts of America until May 1913. The Boy Scouts/YMMIA link began with articles in Improvement Era praising the programme, and expanded when church leaders and Era authors encouraged church members to volunteer to run Mormon scout troops as part of their church work. In March 1914, authors of Improvement Era sought the best men to lead the scouts in each ward and fully integrate scouting into the YMMIA: ‘Always impress the boys that this scout work is a part of the Mutual Improvement work . . . It is a part of the already established and organised work among the boys of our Church’.
In 1915, *Improvement Era* concretised the Boy Scouts/Mormon union when it began publishing the scouting lessons in its pages. In this way, assimilation into American culture was merged with religious imperatives and the social world of young Mormon men seemed to fuse their religion with their citizenship.

As contention between the LDS church and the US government slowly diminished, the desire to fit into American culture became much stronger. Scouting offered a perfect way to synchronise patriotism, American values and Mormon beliefs, while addressing the perceived problem of wayward boys. The impulse of patriotism and the desire to prove that Mormonism and good citizenship were not antithetical was important in a time of developing a cooperative relationship with the American government. ‘Mormon makes for good citizenship, don’t you see? There is no hyphen with “Mormonism”. We have in this Church no Scotch-Americans, or Danish-Americans, or German-Americans, not one; we are all Americans’. More importantly, Mormon manhood made for good citizenship: ‘Yes, the manhood of this nation is writing the definition of the term “American”. Fellow citizens, we want the term American to signify the fullest and most perfect type of manhood the human race can attain. The making of that ideal American is up to us’.40

The First World War upped the patriotic ante, and church leaders reminded young Mormon men that it was their duty to represent America, all the while remaining faithful to their Mormon values. In a transcript of church president Joseph F. Smith’s opening address at the 87th LDS General Conference on 6 April 1917, Mormon men were reminded of their priorities. They were, simultaneously ‘soldiers of the State’ and ‘soldiers of the Cross’. And so, Mormon manhood became linked with American manhood through patriotism, most notably through the Boy Scouts of America programme, but also through service in the armed forces.

In the area of working life, the church sought to shape a boy’s decisions and infuse them with religious significance. Leaders considered specific vocational training essential on the journey to becoming a man. Gone were the days of the ‘jack of all trades’, as industrialisation ushered in efficiency, specialisation and a focus on individual pursuits. *Improvement Era* authors counselled young Mormon men to choose vocations they would enjoy and for which they were appropriately suited, even if the career they chose did not bring them significant financial gain. Although *Era* authors did not emphasise money as a motivating factor in choosing a vocation, they did expect young men to provide for their families and excel in their chosen profession.

Authors of *Improvement Era* encouraged young male Mormons to join their contemporaries in the Protestant world in the pursuit of individual success. They joined the early twentieth-century national vocational movement that took seriously the difference between work and vocation. Supporters of the movement infused vocation with a ‘higher purpose’. American middle-class men endowed themselves with a social mission that made them integral to the development of the industrial world. The concepts of calling and mission in the occupational world easily provided LDS church members with the ability to associate work with divine calling. Choosing a vocation, a calling in the economic world, was choosing the role that would build character and shape the man in this life. According to the author of ‘Conditions of Success’, Jesus Christ’s infinite service to others demonstrated the need to choose a vocation wisely and serve humanity in the process. Like their Protestant counterparts,
Mormons embraced a conception of Jesus that served as an example of a successful life. In this way, Jesus became a model of hard work, service and even career suitability. As early as 1905, *Era* articles discussed choosing and preparing oneself for a suitable career, and in 1913 the YMMIA instituted a vocational training department. Employment services, training and education were part of its mission. During that same year, *Improvement Era* ran a series by B. H. Roberts entitled ‘Vocation and Avocation’. The series covered topics that included practical suggestions for vocational success, the necessity of specialisation, the opportunities to be found in higher education and the importance of having the courage to take a chance. Emphasis lay on finding work that suited one’s natural abilities and interests, and resisting going into a career thoughtlessly or simply because of family pressure. This newfound emphasis on pursuing what one enjoyed was quite a change from the mantra of sacrifice that existed within polygamous Utah, where individual goals and desires could easily be subsumed by the need for familial and community wellbeing and harmony.

Just as vocational options were opening for Mormon men, they were beginning to narrow for Mormon women. While previously women had enjoyed access to medical training and work that looked beyond the domestic sphere, Victorian models of femininity affected the Mormon community as well. Like their Protestant contemporaries, Mormon women were encouraged to become ‘trained home-makers’. In fact, Mormon girls were told that ‘there is no more desirable way for a girl to receive this development, which is so necessary for her to have before she is really ready to manage a home of her own . . . than in a home provided for the purpose, by the college that is made as nearly as possible like a real, live, working, workable home’. Other articles reflected a fear that women were turning away from motherhood and no longer desired to have children. Several authors in the *Young Woman’s Journal* warned against choosing to be childless, and likened the decision to that of murder. The message to the girls in Mormondom was clear: choose a worthy companion, get married, become trained in all things domestic and have children. These four steps would fulfil the measure of their creation and keep them on the path of salvation. Thus, Mormon men were encouraged to expand their horizons in the secular world while Mormon women were encouraged to turn away from the secular world and retreat to the home, where they could become both mothers and professional domestic engineers, equipped with the latest technology and information.

As LDS leaders publicly promoted a monogamous marriage system and an increasingly amicable relationship with the US government, individualisation and specialisation seemed to be the ultimate vocational combination. Mormon men, however, were cautioned to be wary of unchecked individualism because it could ultimately lead to a loss of faith. In an article entitled ‘Some Dangers of Individualism’, the author contended: ‘Carried to its logical conclusion, Individualism advocates the doctrine that the individual should be his own master, unfettered by the thoughts of others, and free from the restraining influence of organisation, civil or religious . . . Young men should not be so fascinated with their own individualism or independence as to let it lead them to discard the truth as revealed and taught by the Church’. Church leaders expected Mormon men to pursue individual goals and desires as long as they were mediated within the community of believers. Thus, the church continued to promote a corporate sense of identity even after the end of polygamy.
The new Mormon man in the spiritual world

In order to manifest the spiritual aspects of Mormon masculinity, a man had to qualify to hold the priesthood. This central pillar offered stability during the era of transition but it did change over these three decades, in response to the concern LDS leaders had expressed about ‘wayward boys’. As stated earlier, the priesthood is the ‘power to act in God’s name’. Currently, all male members of the LDS faith are given the Aaronic priesthood around the age of twelve if they are obedient to the guidelines of the church. This has not always been the case. Prior to the late nineteenth century, it was quite rare for any man in his teenage years to hold the priesthood. From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the offices of the priesthood shifted downwards. By the 1920s, it was not uncommon to see twelve-year-old boys performing rituals, such as administering the sacrament ordinance on Sundays.

The church hierarchy bestowed the priesthood on younger and younger men because of the concern that Mormon boys were moving away from their faith at earlier and earlier ages. Similar to their Protestant contemporaries, Mormon leaders initially focused on young men in order to strengthen masculinity within the church. Church leaders formulated a new understanding of what happened in young men’s teen years: ‘Between the ages of 14 and 20 the boy is changing into a man. He does not understand himself and he is rarely understood by others’. At local level, stake leaders were told to ‘Give [young men] something to do’ because ‘waiting to serve the Lord until the wild oats of youth are sown, is reprehensible’. If the church could teach a young boy about the importance of the priesthood and give him basic responsibilities as a way of training him for a higher priesthood, that boy would be busy throughout his precarious teenage years with church service. Then, ‘the ship of his soul will have passed safely through its first great storm, possibly the very greatest of its voyage’. Church leaders felt that it was their responsibility to come up with activities for young boys because ‘if we do not furnish them with some activity, they will furnish it themselves’. One author wrote, ‘the object of the priesthood [is] intended to bring about the redemption of mankind from death, and also from the consequences of their own sinfulness. Its chief mission is to save and exalt’. Whereas their adolescent Protestant contemporaries were not given any specific religious authority or responsibility, Mormon boys were told that the priesthood endowed them with the authority to perform sacred duties and that those duties were the purview of men in their faith. As such, male teenagers were ritually inducted into the practice of Mormon masculinity by the age of twelve.

Female members of the LDS church were not given the priesthood because it was viewed as a sacred part of the familial patriarchal order which had been re-established from ancient times. Instead, they were encouraged to support their male counterparts and told that ‘every girl should use her influence with the young men of the community to induce them to live sober, upright lives, to discharge their duties in the priesthood, that they may become men of God’. Both male and female teenagers in Mormondom were told they had a vested interest in developing young men into worthy male priesthood-holders.

Even though the Aaronic priesthood may have been offered to younger and younger men as a way of keeping them busy with preparation for greater priesthood responsibilities, it was still necessary to ensure that those young men were worthy of the positions that they held. In their effort to reform wayward teenage boys, the LDS
church used the Word of Wisdom as a new physical barometer for determining spiritual progress. Revealed to Joseph Smith in 1833, the Word of Wisdom instructed believers to abstain from intoxicants and stimulants, such as alcohol, tobacco, tea and coffee. It also contained other guidelines regarding food and health.

Despite its revelatory status, it is clear that until the turn of the twentieth century, Mormons read the Word of Wisdom more as a set of suggestions than as commandments. This may seem strange to twenty-first-century readers. Contemporary Mormonism is very much associated with the health code that pious Mormons practise. This was not always so. Take, for example, the discourse offered by Brigham Young on the use of chewing tobacco in tabernacle meetings:

Last Sabbath this front gallery . . . was very full. After meeting was dismissed I took a walk through it, and to see the floor that had been occupied by those professing to be gentlemen . . . you might have supposed that cattle had been there rolling and standing around, for here and there were great quids of tobacco, and places one or two feet square smeared with tobacco juice. I want to say to the doork eepers that when you see gentlemen who cannot omit chewing and spitting while in this house, request them to leave; and if such persons refuse to leave, and continue their spitting, just take them and lead them out carefully and kindly. We do not want to have the house thus defiled. It is an imposition for gentlemen to spit tobacco juice around, or to leave their quids of tobacco on the floor; they dirty the house, and if a lady happen to besmear the bottom of her dress, which can hardly be avoided, it is highly offensive.

Evidence such as this abounds in nineteenth-century sermons in which Mormons are counselled to be moderate in their drinking and smoking, rather than being told that those activities were strictly prohibited by divine revelation. It was not until the twentieth century, after the Latter-day Saints had given up the practice of polygamy – the practice that had distinguished them from the dominant culture – that the Word of Wisdom began to be read as commandments, and thus a measure of piety.

But how distinct did obedience to the Word of Wisdom make Mormons? With the rest of US society debating temperance and pushing for abstention from alcohol, Mormons were still able to maintain their sense of difference because the Word of Wisdom was a revealed guideline, brought to them through the prophet Joseph Smith. While temperance swept the nation, the Word of Wisdom was a series of guidelines about maintaining the integrity of the physical body, and alcohol was only part of the commandment. As one author in Improvement Era explained, ‘Tea, coffee, tobacco and liquor are just as harmful to the world as to us . . . but we come under a condemnation that doesn’t apply to them, for the Lord has told us that these things are not good, and has commanded us to refrain from them. And we are under covenant to keep his commandments. When we indulge in these things, we suffer a moral degradation as well as a physical hurt’.

As the Word of Wisdom became a new marker of Mormon distinctiveness, its implementation as a spiritual revelation and religious practice was heavily focused upon the male body. The model of femininity embraced by Latter-day Saints took for granted that women would not drink or smoke. Articles in the Young Woman’s Journal admonish young women to discourage their male friends and relatives from drinking alcohol, but very few articles suggest that LDS girls would be tempted by ‘strong drinks’. For example, one author assumed young women did not have any experience with alcoholic beverages, as she described alcohol in depth and explained its history, remarking,
The above history and description of alcohol may to some seem out of place in a young ladies’ journal, but it is suggested that a young lady may have more influence upon her brothers or young friends than any one else, and to be able to discuss the subject intelligently and from established facts, will prepare her to converse more forcibly on the subject of temperance.  

Authorities in both journals explicitly linked the Word of Wisdom with a young man’s worthiness to hold the priesthood. In a cautionary story found in the Young Woman’s Journal titled ‘Respect for the Priesthood’, a young group of Mormon adults drive out of town to a popular establishment where alcohol is being served. When asked by the server if the group would like anything to drink, one young woman firmly says ‘no’ and the rest of the group follows her lead. The author points out to the reader that young men will try to impress young LDS women by obeying the Word of Wisdom if they know young women expect it. Essentially, the message for LDS girls was that they were, in part, responsible for the decisions of young men and, by assisting them in abstaining from alcohol, they could enable their male companions to be worthy of being endowed with the priesthood. In fact, one Young Woman’s Journal author made the claim that,

Girls, as a rule, are easier to rear, quicker to respond to the maternal affections and are generally more sure of a good future life than are the boys who are born into the same household. This fact, of course, does not make the boys any less dear, or the mother’s heart any the less tender over them and their future. In fact, in accordance with the natural law, the mother is more apt to spend her time and anxious thought upon the boys, showing neglect, if neglect there must be, to the girls, because forsooth, the girls will be good anyway.

Obviously, this put an enormous social burden upon young women, which was not uncommon in wider American culture. Women were often charged with carrying the moral responsibilities of society. The Word of Wisdom, although a series of commandments for both men and women, targeted male bodies because of the assumption that it was women’s nature to obey it. Church leaders presumed that men who abstained would be noticeably different from men of other faiths; they would be visibly distinguished as faithful Latter-day Saints. Unlike many other religious traditions in which the female body is the visual signifier of the community’s piety, within Mormonism men bore and bear the markers of piety. Because this teaching was heavily focused upon men, obedience to the Word of Wisdom inadvertently became both a marker of Mormon distinction and the second pillar in a shifting Mormon masculinity.

Stories and articles in Improvement Era abound with warnings about what would happen if a young boy were to ignore the Word of Wisdom. And it is quite clear that in these articles each aspect of the Word of Wisdom defined a masculine trait. Take, for instance, the exhortation to refrain from using tobacco. Quoting George H. Brimhall, the president of Brigham Young University: ‘I don’t know of anything else, unless it is unchastity, that seems to so wither and shrink up the manhood of a boy as the smoking of cigarettes. Long experience has shown that the word of honor of a cigarette smoker is never at par’. Articles and stories warned that smoking sucked away a young man’s ambition, made him a liar, poisoned his body, stunted his character development and, ultimately, emasculated him.

Abstaining from drinking tea was also marked as manly. In one serial romance story, there was a young missionary who refused to drink tea while out in the mission field in, of all places, Liverpool, England. Instead, he drank hot water with milk and...
sugar. This act marked him as different: his potential converts did not quite know what to do with him. In the end, though, that one act, refusing to drink tea, brought him the admiration of many potential converts – he was a man who was not embarrassed to live differently from others.74

This example illustrates how important the Word of Wisdom was becoming as a marker of Mormon masculinity. Although church authorities conceded that women might have faced difficulties giving up tea or coffee, the majority of the literature emphasising the Word of Wisdom was directed at men, and usually young men. Because they would be endowed with the priesthood, their bodies needed to be ready: ‘For an elder especially to eat or smoke is a disgrace – he is not fit for the office, he ought first to learn to keep the Word of Wisdom and then to teach others’.75 Not only did following the Word of Wisdom literally mark a man’s body as faithful and worthy of the priesthood he carried, but it also marked him externally as one who stood out in his culture. Standing alone in the face of social criticism, in and of itself, made a Mormon man a man.

Even though the LDS church had abandoned the practice of polygamy, which had made them intolerably peculiar to others in American society, it continued to construct a masculinity that was set over and against the outside world. This idea can be seen clearly in Era authors’ emphasis on the role of missions in making Mormon men, the third pillar in the new Mormon masculinity. Over the course of the twentieth century, missionary work became an almost universal expectation for priesthood holders. As the age a Mormon male was endowed with the priesthood shifted downwards, the church hierarchy also began slowly shifting the age of missionaries downwards.

Church leaders asserted that it was on a mission that the Mormon boy truly became a man – a faithful man professing his faith in the gentile world. First, a mission would distinguish Mormon men from all other men in their culture: ‘It is a recognized fact that “Mormonism” is silently but surely creating a type of manhood differing in its characteristics from the average, or from the product of other institutions’, noted one elder.76 Second, the returned missionary was a changed person: ‘His shoulders were straighter and broader . . . His steps had lost their hesitancy and now he walked as though he was sure of the ground upon which he trod’.77 It was on his mission that a young man thoroughly scrutinised his character. On his mission, he would ‘rub off angularities [and] tone down local influences’.78 The missionary was supposed to be physically healthy in order to counsel people spiritually; at the same time, Era authors assured him that his spiritual strength would be reflected physically after his mission.

The time that a young man spent on his mission also helped him develop a mature faith. Bringing one soul to the faith meant ‘you will . . . have laboured with sufficient zeal to get the foundations of your own future salvation’.79 Young men were also told that on their missions they would find the strength of their testimony, a knowledge of the truthfulness of their faith that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and the Book of Mormon a true revelation. Their testimony set them apart from others.

Stories assured young men that once physically and spiritually transformed by missionary work, they would receive a new kind of respect from the Mormon community upon their return home: young women would listen to them and gaze at them longingly, for they were now not only worthy Mormon men, they were worthy husbands. Girls who had been mean to them would rue the choices they had made.80 A young man could even expect to be treated differently by his mother, who would no
longer feel he needed nurturing after his mission. In a letter from a mother to her missionary son, the young missionary was told he would no longer be called Dan or Dannie-boy, but rather Daniel, ‘because you have now taken upon you the station and character of a man – aye, a man in Jesus Christ’.  

Church authorities preached that it was in their interactions with non-believers who chastised and despised them that Mormon missionaries found both their manliness and their faith. ‘Elders laboring in the ministry are generally timid to begin with, and... they meet rebuffs that make them sick at heart’, wrote one author, but these young men ‘go at the work again and again until they relish it, and are stirred by the opposition to better efforts’. It was the rock-throwing and the cursing of antagonists that gave young Mormon men their distinctiveness; they were men in the face of opposition. In standing firm, they were likened to Joseph Smith who was ‘misunderstood and hated by the world’, and yet continued to stand strong in his faith.

Missions were not emphasised within the pages of the Young Woman’s Journal, except to illustrate how attractive they made young men. The predominant message to young women was that to become involved with a non-believer would lead to a life of sorrow and sin. Young women were reminded that they should marry those they courted, and to marry outside the covenant would be devastating, particularly to the children of the union. In fact, authors counselled the girls that it would be better to stay single than to marry a boy who was not a devout Mormon. The absence of literature addressing missions points to the masculine nature of missionary work for the Mormons of this era. Missions offered a way to demonstrate one’s worthiness to the priesthood, while serving God and the church.

As the LDS church moved away from the polygamous practices that had caused it to be persecuted by the American government, it continued to stress religious beliefs that encouraged obvious, though not always substantive, differences from the larger culture, thus infusing religious distinction into its model of masculinity. According to Era authors, serving a full-time mission, and doing so worthily, was a critical event in a young Mormon man’s life and he was expected to stand out in his culture and stand up in the face of oppression. It was at this time that he became a man, outside the community and in the midst of non-believers. When he returned home, his status as a Mormon man was assured. Though he was still expected to maintain his worthiness as a priest, there was no question that he had come of age.

Although Era authors accentuated the physical ways that Mormon men would stand out as unique, in print they simultaneously encouraged their young men to follow the pursuits that their white, middle-class, Protestant contemporaries followed. In this way, they reinforced to any non-Mormon reading audience that the church had indeed embraced new marital practices and encouraged church members to enter the American mainstream. The primary way they did so was by couching monogamy and middle-class sexual norms in Mormon theological and social terms. In this way, Mormons laid claim to a fourth pillar that had initially been forced onto them by outsiders: monogamous heterosexuality had to be reconceived as a Mormon religious practice.

Mormon men were told that they would be held to the same sexual standards as women. When it came to sexual values, the highest Mormon officials swiftly rejected the ‘boys will be boys’ attitude. Era authors reminded readers that a sexual double standard would not be tolerated by God or the church. Heber J. Grant stated that ‘the religion which will save the world is the religion which among the first things faces this
problem of sex squarely, which insists first of all upon clean men and clean women’.  

Similarly, prophet of the church Joseph F. Smith admonished members that ‘No more loathsome cancer disfigures the body and soul of society today than the frightful affliction of sexual sin. It is a deplorable fact that society persists in holding woman to stricter account than man in the matter of sexual offense. And man is largely responsible for the sins against decency and virtue, the burden of which is too often fastened upon the weaker participant in the crime’. 

Linking the individual body to the church body, church leaders made sexual purity a primary concern of the church. In this way, Mormon men became marked as carrying religious and moral purity in a new way. By associating the church with middle-class Protestant understandings of monogamy and sexual purity and by reinterpreting those practices as Mormon practices, the church took one step towards placing itself within the American mainstream, and reinforced the new model of Mormon masculinity with a fourth pillar.

Ongoing themes in Improvement Era demonstrate a concern that young men searched for a mate within the strictures of what was accepted white middle-class morality. Era authors sought a model of courtship at the same time that American teenagers were slowly entering into the age of dating. Just like their Protestant contemporaries, church authorities stressed a courtship with many rules, in which chaperoned interactions and virginity were held in the highest regard. Courtship was ‘not merely a flirtation with no serious object in view’, but rather a choice for time and eternity.

Now they taught their young men that it was a companionate marriage that should be sought, one with a clear vision of which roles should be filled by each person. For Mormon men, the quest for a mate was a religious quest as well: ‘No man of marriageable age is living his religion who remains single’. Bachelorhood was not a romanticised state, but rather a sign of spiritual jeopardy.

At the same time that young men were being instructed to court young women who would be ideal eternal mates, young women were being counselled that they should be the kind of women that young men would want to marry. They were told that ‘the perfect woman was not only righteous and talented but desirable’. Prior to 1890, LDS women were taught that the most valued characteristics of a woman included aspects of a pioneer femininity, a woman who could work alongside her husband and support him as he carved civilisation out of the wilderness. However, according to both Improvement Era and Young Woman’s Journal authors, the ideal Mormon woman was gentle and perpetually available to her spouse. She was respectful of the privacy of their union and she did not share her marital problems with others. The ideal female companion always considered her husband’s wishes and desires above her own. If she became dominant, problems ensued. As one article noted, ‘When the husband constantly plays barometer to his wife’s weather, when she is the voice and he the echo, when she is the substance and he is the shadow, it is not a true co-partnership’. Women were taught that the ideal gender role was a complementary one, in which the wife supported the husband and excelled in home activities while he presided over the family. The ideal wife was not to limit her husband’s friendships nor be jealous of his other pursuits. She listened when he talked about his work, and if he did not, she understood that she might be the cause of his silence. The biggest fear was a family divided: the greatest offence was finding fault in one’s husband. The worst response: nagging. The new ideal Mormon woman looked remarkably like her contemporary Protestant counterpart.
During this era of transition, LDS women were increasingly taught that the most important traits were those that made the home a place of comfort for their husbands when they returned from the secular business world; romanticism within a monogamous union was one of the comforts of home life. In the prescriptive literature for both young men and young women, romance became a key component of the descriptions of monogamous matrimony. However, as Melissa Inouye has noted, ‘the religious was romantic’. Women were taught that they would find a companion in their ideal mate. At the same time, they were advised that their mates must be worthy priesthood-holders; their future eternal life depended on it. By elevating the monogamous, companionate marriage as the ideal, LDS church authorities aligned themselves with their Protestant counterparts. For Mormon men, finding the ideal woman, committing to her worthily, and only to her, and becoming the finest priesthood-holding husband possible, became important elements of Mormon masculinity. With the four pillars of Mormon masculinity firmly positioned in the bedrock of divine revelation, the new Mormon man was on his way to integrating himself into the secular world, while maintaining his tolerable differences.

Conclusion

In his article ‘Academic Viagra’, Bryce Traister argues that a ‘crisis model’ of masculinity which ‘locates instability at the base of all masculine identities’ has dominated historiographies of American masculinity. Traister points out that historians have managed to identify a crisis in masculinity at virtually every moment in American history. In his analysis, Traister finds this common motif in studies that have embraced the notion of gender as a ‘historically contingent’ performance. The common narrative is of men who fail to live up to the heteromasculine norm, who fail to perform their masculinity properly. Their failure, in turn, leads to a sense of crisis in the larger society.

Traister raises important concerns about the historiography of American masculinity and warns against the crisis motif, arguing that it has in many ways lost its ability to be a helpful explanatory device. With these cautions in mind, we still believe that, for our purposes, a ‘crisis’ is an adequate description of what happened in the Mormon community. The period from 1890 to 1920 marked a fundamental shift in the way members of the LDS church understood what made them stand out from the rest of American society. In a very essential way they experienced, as individuals and as a group, an identity crisis.

At the foundation of that crisis of identity was the abandonment of the practice of polygamy which stood out as the central religious act that marked Mormons as a distinct people. Over the course of thirty years, Latter-day Saints gave up the marital practices that defined them as celestial men and women, and to a large degree embraced the ‘straight’ monogamous heteromasculinity of the white Protestant majority. In other words, in the Mormon case we can witness a group shift away from a practice considered intolerably ‘queer’ by the larger culture to a practice aligned with the cultural norms. The refashioned model of Mormon masculinity was critical to the maintenance of a distinct religious identity; Mormon men and their bodies bore the markers of this identity. The prescriptive literature geared towards the young women in the LDS church differed little from that which was directed at their Protestant contemporaries.
In contrast, pages of *Improvement Era* are filled with articles that encouraged Mormon males to align themselves with the values of the larger American culture: monogamy, temperance, patriotism and vocational devotion. Yet, *Era* authors and church leaders reminded young men that Mormons were different; they were authorised to act in God’s name through their priesthood, they had a divinely revealed health code, they served missions and they had a temple, where monogamous marriages were ordained by God.

Though the prescriptive literature often portrayed the transition as a smooth one, the actual process was surely filled with both personal and corporate crises. These may well be best expressed in the words of church member and practising polygamist B. H. Roberts who, upon hearing that the church president Wilford Woodruff had publicly announced that church members would give up polygamy, declared ‘To lay [polygamy] down like this was a kind of cowardly proceeding . . . [and] the more I thought of it the less I liked it’.99

A seismic shift began with the change in the understandings of sexuality of an entire people; they gave up the sexual practices that they believed aligned them with God’s will and therefore marked them as chosen. That shift in sexuality profoundly changed the model of ideal masculinity in Mormonism. Nowhere else in US history do we have such an instance where, within a matter of three decades, a group changed its sexual practices and successfully constructed a new masculinity around them.

In 1890, one of the central pillars of masculinity that made Mormon men distinct had to be replaced with sexual practices that aligned them with their peers. As Mormons restructured masculinity around the practice of monogamy, they placed the burden of the refashioned religious identity almost exclusively upon men and their bodies. In the end, the new religious identity only helped to further their alliances with their Protestant contemporaries, paving the way for them to claim a stake in *American* identity. The new Mormon man, invented in prescriptive literature and slowly embraced by church members, ushered the LDS church into the American mainstream while maintaining an acceptable difference from that mainstream culture. From 1890 to 1920, Mormons reconstructed a model of masculinity that both affirmed their sense of being part of God’s chosen people and allowed them to claim an identity as Americans.

Notes
8. The General Authorities are the male religious leaders within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who work under the direction of the prophet.


13. There is also evidence of marriages that were only for eternity, which tended to mean that the couple did not participate in sexual activity. For a discussion of these and other types of marriages, see Daynes, *More Wives than One*, pp. 76–80.


18. Gordon, *Mormon Question*, p. 120.


21. Flake, *Politics of American Religious Identity*, pp. 28, 64; Firmage and Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts*, pp. 161–93. The courts 'identified cohabitation as being an offence of appearance or reputation, for under such evidentiary standards an accused’s actual conduct seemed largely irrelevant. Mormons widely reputed to be polygamists could, by using strings of presumptions and the testimony of what people thought their marital relations were, be quickly convicted whatever they tried to do’. Firmage and Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts*, p. 193.


32. There was initially some debate over joining the Boy Scouts of America, but by March 1913 LDS leaders realised that the potential returns of membership of the movement far outweighed the costs. See Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, pp. 144–5.


35. *Improvement Era* 17 (February 1914), pp. 385–7.


37. *Improvement Era* 17 (March 1914), p. 490.

42. Improvement Era 16 (June 1913), pp. 822–3.
44. Alexander, Mormonism in Transition, pp. 182–5, 211.
47. Improvement Era 17 (February 1914), pp. 380–84. For an example of the Protestant attempt to interpret Jesus in this way, see Bruce Barton’s The Man Nobody Knows (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).
49. Young Woman’s Journal 30 (October 1919), p. 531.
50. Young Woman’s Journal 30 (October 1919), p. 532.
52. Young Woman’s Journal 30 (October 1919), p. 532.
61. Young Woman’s Journal 3 (June 1891), p. 430.
66. E.g., ‘In the past responsibility for immoral conduct has rested more heavily upon woman. She is learning to evade what was once the insignia of her shame . . . They [women] are more steadfast as students and have fewer evil habits that sap the physical and mental life of man’. Improvement Era 21 (June 1918), p. 705.
68. Young Woman’s Journal 5 (August 1894), pp. 529–34.
70. It is important to note here that Protestants and other religious believers were also concerned about the use of some of these substances, particularly alcohol, at the exact same time. They too attempted to make abstinence from alcohol a ‘manly’ act. See Kimmel, Manhood in America, p. 128.
73. Later, the question of whether or not Latter-day Saints should drink Coca Cola became a popular question. Readers were instructed about the harmful effects of caffeine and were therefore warned against it. Improvement Era 21 (March 1918), p. 433.
74. Improvement Era 11 (November 1907 to October 1908). See serial story ‘The Romance of a Missionary’ throughout vol. 11.

77. *Improvement Era* 3 (1900), p. 28.

78. *Improvement Era* 7 (1904), p. 91.


80. *Improvement Era* 3 (1900), pp. 27–9.


82. *Improvement Era* 7 (1904), pp. 175–6.

83. *Young Woman’s Journal* 2 (February 1891), p. 236. See also ‘Love’s Sacrifice’, *Young Woman’s Journal* 2 (June 1891); *Young Woman’s Journal* 5 (March 1894), pp. 277–81.

84. In recent decades, more Mormon women have chosen to participate in mission work, but it is still largely a male endeavour. There is no expectation that a Mormon female should participate in mission work in order to prove her worthiness as a member of the community or as a potential spouse.


86. *Improvement Era* 19 (September 1916), p. 1008.


88. *Improvement Era* 20 (June 1917), pp. 738–43.

89. *Improvement Era* 6 (1903), p. 532.


94. *Improvement Era* 16 (November 1912), pp. 52–7; *Improvement Era* 16 (December 1912), pp. 149–53.


99. University of Utah, Salt Lake City, J. Willard Marriott Library, Roberts Record, 3 November 1890 to May 1892 and 13 January 1893 to 24 June 1893, MS 106.