I Roll the Burthen and Responsibility of Leading This Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours: The 1844/1845 Declaration of the Quorum of the Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession

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Abstract
The document presented and discussed in this paper is one of the most important early Latter-day Saint manuscripts associated with both the final months of Joseph Smith's life and the postmartyrdom (or apostolic) interregnum period. Written in late 1844 or early 1845, the document appears to have been drafted for possible use as an official statement by the Twelve concerning Joseph Smith's "last charge" to them, given at a special meeting held in late March 1844, three months before his death. On this occasion, the Prophet conferred upon the Twelve the priesthood keys and authority necessary to lead the Church following his death. The document is a powerful, declarative, united testimony that the Twelve were the authorized legal successors to Joseph Smith. Furthermore, the declaration provides valuable historical information concerning the March meeting—including where the meeting was held, which members of the Twelve were present, and the core of what Joseph Smith said on that occasion.

Recommended Citation
Baugh, Alexander L. (2010) "I Roll the Burthen and Responsibility of Leading This Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours: The 1844/1845 Declaration of the Quorum of the Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession," BYU Studies Quarterly: Vol. 49 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol49/iss3/2

The prophet called the quorum of the twelve together several months before his death, and informed them that the Lord had commanded him to hasten their endowments; that he did not expect to remain himself to see the temple completed, but wished to confer the keys of the kingdom of God upon other men, that they might build up the church and kingdom. Upon the shoulders of the Twenty must the responsibility of leading this church henceforth rest until you shall appoint others to succeed you. See also: Quorum of the Twelve and Chronology of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (LDS Church). Prior to 1889, whether succession was to proceed by apostolic seniority had not become a universal expectation. From 1835 to 1843, seniority within the Quorum of the Twelve (then often called Council of the Twelve) was by age, that is, according to dates of birth. I Roll the Burthen and Responsibility of Leading This Church Off from My Shoulders on to Yours: The 1844/1845 Declaration of the Quorum of the Twelve Regarding Apostolic Succession. Ronald W. Walker (2011).