

The April 2021 issue of the *Journal of Mormon History* will feature a 5-essay forum on Forgery in Mormon history. That forum will include fascinating essays from Clair Barrus, Benjamin E. Park, Cheryl L. Bruno, John S. Dinger, and Ryan T. Roos. Because we expect a great deal of attention on this subject with the release of the Netflix documentary, *Murder among the Mormons*, we are releasing Roos's article covering forgeries and their impact on the Latter-day Saint tradition from the nineteenth century, to Hofmann, and beyond.

Mormon Forgery: Past and Present

Ryan T. Roos

In 1996, Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, stunned historians by claiming that 40 percent of all museum art was likely forged.¹ Experts since have come to hold Hoving's once unbelievable assessment as highly conservative.² In all fields of history, the plague of forgery shows only signs of acceleration as experts struggle to keep pace with technological advances and an unprecedented volume of materials entering the marketplace. Religious art, documents, and artifacts are traditionally fertile grounds for manufactured fraud. Mormon history has proven to be no exception. With its unique blend of modernity, dispersion, and commitment to material culture, the Mormon story has situated both its adherents and faith traditions as easy prey within the ecosystem of religious forgery.

In this essay, I speak to three primary periods in the history of Latter-day Saint forgery. In the earliest period, a heavy emphasis was placed upon archaeological finds, such as plates, stones, or other familiar elements of Mormonism's founding story. Early Mormon leaders actively sought to meet the appetite of a Mormon community craving a more tangible evidence of its divine heritage. In a second period, following Joseph Smith's death, literary forgeries served primarily as a tool to alter or undermine classic understandings of the faith, such as with James Strang's appointment letter and the

¹ Anthony M. Amore, *The Art of the Con: The Most Notorious Fakes, Frauds, and Forgeries in the Art World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

² "Over 50 Percent of Art is Fake," Artnet News, last modified October 14, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/market/over-50-percent-of-art-is-fake-130821>.

Oliver Cowdery forgeries of 1906. Finally, in a third period, with the emergence of a series of interest-generating historical finds in the late 1960s, forging of Latter-day Saint documents became financially lucrative enough to draw forgery-for-profit con artists into the fold.

Archaeological Fabrications

In 1843, a set of six two-sided brass plates, fashioned in a bell shape and fastened with a single ring, made their way to the city of Nauvoo. Residents naturally associated the discovery of the plates with the gold plates of the Book of Mormon, and city newspapers lost little time in running full stories on their arrival to confirm such potential implications.³ These “Kinderhook plates,” the namesake of the small Illinois town from which they emerged, bore a collection of seemingly ancient engravings that all but cried out for the expertise of the Mormon prophet. Consulted by the plates’ owners, Joseph Smith apparently recognized a common symbol from his work on the Book of Abraham, a symbol for which he had already offered a translation. His brief accounting of this symbol was soon published, along with editorial optimism for a forthcoming translation of the collection. Whether from Joseph’s lack of availability or interest, or perhaps the owners’ own reluctance to leave their brass treasure in Nauvoo, the project never materialized.⁴

Decades later a trio of local farmers and a blacksmith disclosed they had forged the plates in an attempt to trick Smith into rendering a counterfeit translation. While the Kinderhook plates never emerged as the desired evidence of either supernatural skill or prophetic fraud that many had hoped, the Latter-day Saint appetite for fresh discoveries had clearly been aroused, and the vast American countryside served as fertile ground for the creation and discovery of such remarkable finds.

One such enthusiast was LDS apostle Orson Pratt. Pratt, whose doctrinal writings rank among the most published of the era, was in prime position to explore, in print, the significance of these American archaeological finds that so captured his imagination. While in England, Pratt republished an impressive broadside foldout of the Kinderhook plates for distribution among missionaries, investigators, and newly baptized members.⁵ In 1860, burial mounds near the town of Newark, Ohio,

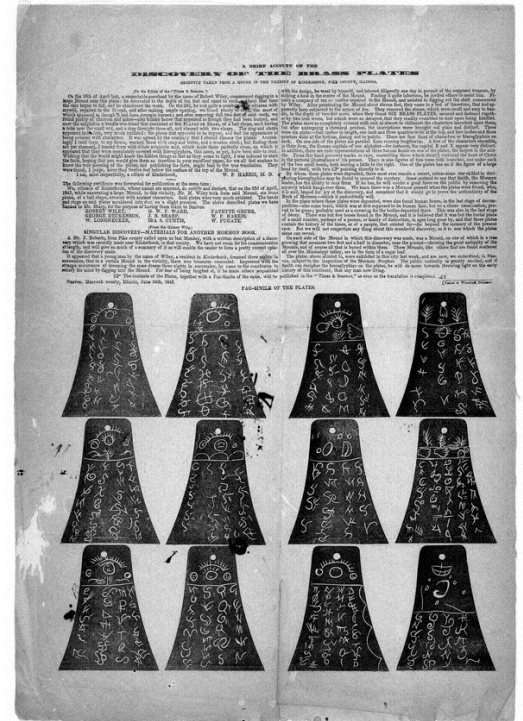


Figure 1: Wood engraved facsimile of the Kinderhook Plates. Nauvoo, 1843. Orson Pratt's passion for the discovery gave the plates new life among English converts during the 1850s. Wikimedia Commons.

³ Peter Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church: 1830–1847* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 224.

⁴ For a history of the Kinderhook Plates, see Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “‘President Joseph Has Translated a Portion’: Joseph Smith and the Mistranslation of the Kinderhook Plates,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 452–523.

⁵ Crawley, *Descriptive Bibliography*, 225.

yielded a pair of ancient Hebrew artifacts that became known as the Newark Holy Stones. For Pratt, this discovery was intimately connected with that of the Book of Mormon. On the front page to the *Millennial Star*, he penned an unequivocal endorsement of the seemingly providential find: “We are sure that our readers will hail these late discoveries with unbounded joy, as the most incontrovertible external evidence of the divine authenticity of the sacred writings, taken from the Nephite gold Plates.” Pratt further claimed that the stones contained the writings of the very same “American Israelite” nation whose rise and fall had been chronicled in the Book of Mormon.⁶ The crowning result of Pratt’s belief in both the Kinderhook plates, and the Newark stones was manifest in his influential footnotes published in the 1879 LDS edition of the Book of Mormon, the first study notations to be published within any volume of Latter-day Saint scripture. In producing his references, Pratt’s passion for these recent discoveries is aflame throughout, but perhaps no more so than when he identifies the burial mounds mentioned in Ether 11:6 as being those native burial mounds being found across North America—the very mounds from which both sets of the newly “discovered” writings were said to have emerged.⁷ Pratt never lived to see either the Kinderhook plates or Newark stones exposed as nineteenth-century forgeries. His footnotes were officially removed from the Book of Mormon in 1920.

Mormonism’s incursion into literary forgery—that is texts rather than relics—is often traced back to the appearance of James J. Strang and his letter of appointment. A late convert to the Nauvoo church in February of 1844, Strang emerged just days after the murder of the Smith brothers with significant claims to leadership, and some highly controversial documentation to prove it. As evidence of his designation as Smith’s proper and immediate successor, Strang brought forth a letter of appointment—complete with the former prophet’s signature—as irrefutable grounds for his next calling.⁸ At issue for many was that the document appeared to be a letter of localized appointment, not in Smith’s hand, and bearing a signature that was blockish and awkwardly constructed. While Strang’s letter of appointment failed to impress the majority during the 1844 succession crisis, his foray into the slain prophet’s playbook, which eventually extended into “new revelations, using a seer stone and Urim and Thummim to translate ancient documents, and claiming an angel ordained him”⁹ siphoned a significant contingent of Smith’s former followers, including such Mormon luminaries as Martin Harris and Lucy Mack Smith. Ultimately, Strang’s replication of the Joseph Smith story ended in gunfire, as did Joseph’s, and he was assassinated in the summer of 1856.¹⁰

⁶ Orson Pratt, “Sacred Stones in the Vicinity of Newark, Licking County, Ohio,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 28, no. 48 (December 1866): 758.

⁷ Joseph Smith, Jun., ed., *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1879), 595.

⁸ Roger Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 7–10.

⁹ D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1994), 211.

¹⁰ Van Noord, *King of Beaver Island*, 248–50.

Early Twentieth-Century Anti-Mormon Forgeries

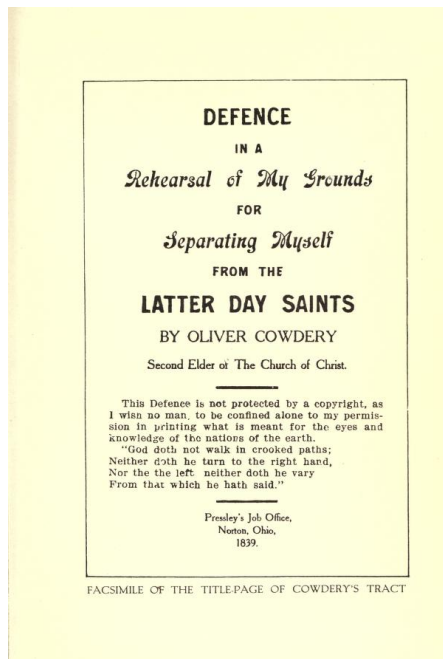


Figure 2 With the original tract available, fanciful renderings of the Cowdery Defence soon emerged, each mimicking Daniel B. Turney's description of the document's title page.

In April of 1905, Robert D. Neal, the editor of an obscure Kentucky Christian newspaper, informed his readership that a portion of an explosive but little known document—penned and published by Oliver Cowdery himself—was soon to grace the pages of their small-town newspaper.¹¹ As promised, the July 1905 edition of *The Helper* featured a brief excerpt from a purported 1839 tract written by Cowdery while in Ohio, titled: *Defence in a Rehearsal of my Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints*.¹² The small sample Neal provided, which was reportedly a firsthand account of Cowdery's experience attempting to sell the Book of Mormon copyright in Canada, marked the initial appearance of the alleged Cowdery tract. That same July, Neal published what he claimed to be an authentic transcript of the pamphlet's original title page in the Cincinnati based *Christian Standard*, along with the claim that the tract was rarer than "a polar bear in the Philippines."¹³ Despite Neal's claim to good fortune, a transcription of the tract's title page text was apparently all Neal had received from his source, and all his readership would be left with for some time. The text would remain mere innuendo for more than a year.¹⁴

Neal was never shy about extending his appreciation to the man he claimed had uncovered, and now hid (for security purposes), this most remarkable history: Daniel Braxton Turney. Turney, an Illinois author turned politician, was a fierce newcomer to the anti-Mormon stage. As head of the fledgling American Anti-Mormon Association, Neal appreciated Turney's passion, as well as his uncanny ability to uncover fabulous, and otherwise unheard of, Mormon documents. Neal informed his readership that for the document's safety the whereabouts of this only known copy could never be revealed for fear of it coming up missing, and its precious history lost forever. It was upon this premise of extraordinary scarcity that Neal and Turney set to work on a fundraising effort to republish the pamphlet, soliciting one dollar from each subscriber.¹⁵ While Neal claimed to have the pamphlet's contents firmly in hand, he never explicitly claimed to have seen the original 1839 pressing. All that is certain is that Turney was Neal's source for both the knowledge of the document's existence, and, at least initially, its content.

The record is silent as to when Neal finally acquired the purported text of the pamphlet. It would be a full year until he would again promote the work. In Neal's 1906 *Anti-Mormon Tracts Series*, the *Defence* was marketed much the same way as it had been the year before. "No more important document has been unearthed since I have been engaged in this warfare than the following from Oliver Cowdery," he wrote.¹⁶ And with this, readers were finally introduced to the hidden Cowdery they had

¹¹ R. D. Neal, "Oliver Cowdery's Renunciation of Mormonism," *The Helper* 3, nos. 7–8 (April/May 1905).

¹² R. D. Neal, "A Togo Blow," *The Helper* 3, nos. 9–10 (June/July 1905).

¹³ R. D. Neal, "A Togo Blow," *Christian Standard* 41, no. 27 (July 1905).

¹⁴ R. D. Neal, "Oliver Cowdery's Defence and Renunciation," *Anti-Mormon Tracts*, no. 9 (1906).

¹⁵ R. D. Neal, "A Togo Blow," *"Sword of Laban" Leaflets*, no. 7 (1906).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 11 (1906).

been teased with for well over a year—a Cowdery who, in his own words, was full of doubt as to Joseph Smith’s credibility, as well as the veracity of the Book of Mormon itself. As if these alleged doubts weren’t enough to smother a potential Mormon convert’s interest, the Cowdery of Neal’s pamphlet shares with his reader a revelatory experience in which Jesus Christ himself appeared to Cowdery in “open vision” and commanded him to separate himself from the Latter-day Saints.¹⁷

That this alleged Cowdery document was taken at face value upon its introduction is a matter of history. Authors from both the RLDS and LDS traditions made efforts to contextualize it. B. H. Roberts, presuming its authenticity, made a note of the tract in his *Comprehensive History of the Church*.¹⁸ Yet the question arose almost immediately as to why Cowdery, having been divinely instructed to leave the Saints, would choose to rejoin them less than a decade later. Perhaps to offset this incongruity, a second, and equally suspicious document soon emerged asserting that the Oliver who reunited with his friends and family among the Saints in Council Bluffs, Iowa, was in fact an actor named Oliver Overstreet, a man who had been secretly paid \$500 at the behest of President Brigham Young for his apparently sensational thespian services. This document, a typescript, is commonly referred to as: *A Confession of Oliver Overstreet* and claims to have originated in 1857 as part of a confession delivered to a Salt Lake City probate court, notarized by Judge Elias Smith, and witnessed by city residents Jesse W. Fox, Henry McEwan, and John M. Bollwinkel.

Both documents however possess if not a singular author, a similar flaw: the purported originals don’t appear to have ever existed. Neal’s rare “polar bear in the Philippines” bears an unmistakable structural kinship with David Whitmer’s *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, and has been shown to be heavily comprised of phrases clipped verbatim from Cowdery’s earlier writings in the *Messenger and Advocate*.¹⁹ More problematic still, there is no record showing that the publishing house said to have printed the 1839 original, Pressley’s Job Office of Norton, Ohio, ever existed.²⁰ The Oliver Overstreet confession fairs even worse under historical scrutiny. It employs as its main character a man who appears to have acted his way out of an appearance on all period census records. Casting further doubt on the document’s antiquity, the confession looks to have lifted for its judge and three key witnesses the identities of four otherwise unrelated men whose names once appeared all together on an 1857 consecration deed published in T. B. H. Stenhouse’s widely read *Rocky Mountain Saints*.²¹

Decade of Discovery

Early Mormon documents played a limited role in the popular literature of the church until the 1960s. Mormon publishing houses such as Bookcraft and Deseret Book had devoted their volumes largely to the writings of current general authorities. It was not until the 1960s that early Mormon documents were heavily deployed as a means of enhancing traditional understandings of the faith. This

¹⁷ R. D. Neal, “Oliver Cowdery’s Revelation,” *“Sword of Laban” Leaflets*, no. 6 (1906).

¹⁸ B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century 1, Volume 1* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News Press, 1930), 163.

¹⁹ David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: A Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887); Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *A Critical Look: A Study of the Overstreet “Confession” and the Cowdery “Defense”* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministries, 1967).

²⁰ Richard L. Anderson, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, April 1987.

²¹ T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints: A Full and Complete History of the Mormons, from the First Vision of Joseph Smith to the Last Courtship of Brigham Young* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 501–2.

dramatic shift was facilitated in large part by the formation of two document-rich scholarly journals, *BYU Studies* (1956) and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (1966), as well as a pair of landmark document discoveries relating to church founder, Joseph Smith. This emphasis on the value of historical documents in understanding the faith led to an almost immediate increase in the financial value of historical Mormon journals, letters, and other primary source writings.

While the emergence of these academic periodicals aimed at LDS readership was significant, their timing was pristine. Beginning with the discovery of the 1832 First Vision account by graduate student Paul Cheeseman in 1965,²² and followed the succeeding year by the resurrection of the long-lost Joseph Smith papyri by University of Utah professor Dr. Aziz Atiya, the understanding of the Mormon past was revealing itself to be remarkably fluid. Church membership was now expressing an “unprecedented interest” in newly found historical writings, as the *Improvement Era*’s managing editor Doyle L. Green explained in his introduction of the recently found papyri.²³ At the heart of both discoveries lay documents which had seemingly been hidden in plain sight. It is no coincidence that less than ten years after the newly discovered First Vision and Abrahamic scripture had attracted such notoriety that the ink would be drying on Mark Hofmann's first public forgery.

The Mark Hofmann Era

During the summer of 1978, a young Utah State University student walked into Utah Lighthouse Ministries, a Salt Lake City bookshop owned by noted critics of Mormonism, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. The man displayed a forged version of what he claimed to be an early family heirloom, an authentic second anointing blessing. The verso of this handwritten document was conspicuously branded “destroy.”²⁴ A man of altered appearances, this soft-spoken premed student would soon unleash an army of forgeries into the Mormon community that would forever scar the historical record and culminate in an unimaginable murder spree.²⁵

As an LDS missionary in England, Mark Hofmann had his pick of high-end bookshops to browse. It was during one of these scouting trips that Hofmann would discover and purchase an exceptional piece of history, an authentic 1668 King James Bible. England also afforded the young missionary the luxury of time to read, time ill-gotten by his forgery of mission documents relating to the hours he had worked, and that the missionary in part used to consume Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, a deeply critical biography of the founding prophet, Joseph Smith.²⁶ Affected by both his exposure to Brodie and rare book culture, Hofmann returned to the states and began mining various archives for clues as to which Mormon documents might exist, should exist, and would be shocking were they to ever be discovered.

²² Paul R. Cheeseman, “An Analysis of the Accounts Relating Joseph Smith’s Early Visions,” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1965).

²³ Doyle L. Green, “New Light on Joseph Smith’s Egyptian Papyri,” *Improvement Era*, February 1968, 40.

²⁴ Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1988), 227.

²⁵ Works on Mark Hofmann’s life and career include: Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*; Robert Lindsey, *A Gathering of Saints: A True Story of Money, Murder, and Deceit* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1988); Richard E. Turley, *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

²⁶ Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 211.

Hofmann's first significant attempt at altering the Latter-day Saint past came somewhere between 1978–1979 with the appearance of a letter claiming to have been authored by Joseph Smith to sisters Maria and Sarah Lawrence. In Hofmann's hand, Smith solicits a reunion between the sisters in Ohio just days before his demise at Carthage Jail. However, the early attempt at forgery failed to impress A. J. Simmons, the special collections curator at Utah State University. When presented with the document, Simmons told Hofmann that the content relied too heavily upon common stereotypes to be authentic, and that Hofmann's "discovery" was likely a poorly executed fake.²⁷ With this critique, Simmons had unwittingly offered Hofmann valuable advice on how to internally craft his forgeries so as to elude such immediate detection moving forward.

The following year, Hofmann would approach Simmons again, this time with the same 1668 Bible he had purchased in England, complete with a freshly minted backstory. The Bible was now, according to Hofmann, a family Bible rumored to have come directly from the Joseph Smith family, via the line of Samuel Smith, great-grandfather to the church founder. With contrived curiosity, Hofmann solicited the help of Simmons to pry apart two sealed pages near the Old Testament book of Proverbs. As planned, upon separating the leaves, the pair would together discover Hofmann's first profitable forged document: the original Charles Anthon transcript.²⁸ In Mormon history, the "Anthon Transcript" has come to represent a significant enigma. What is known is that a document written in Joseph Smith's own hand was created between December 1827 to February 1828²⁹ and said by Smith to have reproduced many of the reformed Egyptian characters found upon the golden plates he was at that time translating. Also known is that Martin Harris took possession of this document in February of 1828 and subjected it to experts of ancient languages, including Charles Anthon of Columbia College, in hopes of gathering further evidence as to the authenticity of Smith's translation. Where controversy has emerged is in regards to what is commonly held as the surviving copy of this transcript, known today as the "Caractors" document, and its clear defection in appearance from the document Anthon himself claimed to have handled. In a letter dated April 3, 1841, Charles Anthon recorded a detailed physical description of the original transcript, one that included two key elements absent from the Caractors document. Said Anthon: "The characters were arranged in columns, like the chinese mode of writing . . . and the whole ended in a rude representation of the Mexican zodiac."³⁰ As if ordered from a lost document menu, Hofmann's Anthon transcript accentuated these very features.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 233–34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 236–37.

²⁹ Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents, Volume IV* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2002), 414.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 383.

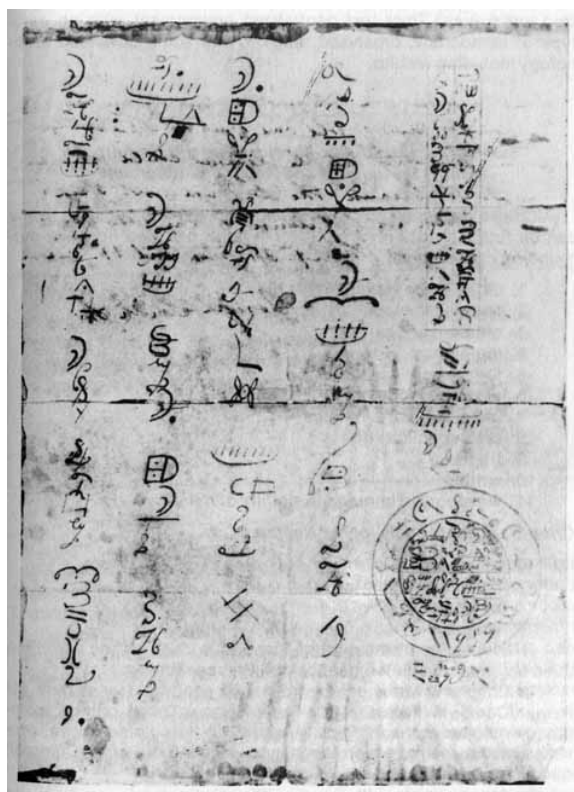


Figure 3 Hofmann's Anthon Transcript. By utilizing the scantest of historical clues to create his documents, Hofmann placed himself at the forefront of American forgers. Wikimedia Commons.

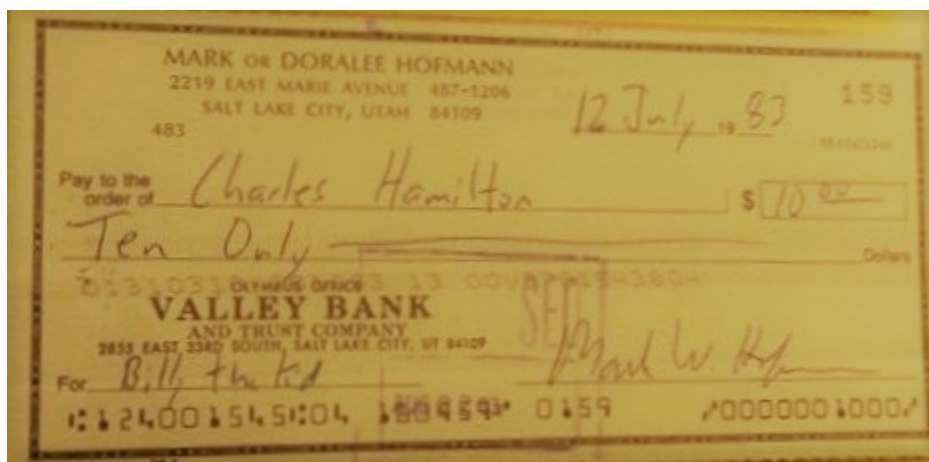


Figure 4 Hofmann used the finest forgery and handwriting experts of the era to authenticate his findings.

As with the prolific document finds of the 1960s, the Anthon discovery was an immediate sensation and placed Hofmann at the forefront of statewide press coverage and into dialogue with top LDS leadership. Having experienced his first taste of success, Hofmann soon left school and entered the rare book and document trade as its brightest rising star.

Hofmann's ensuing creation, the Joseph Smith III blessing, marked a new stage in his forgeries: that of the highly controversial.³¹ As Hofmann explained at the time: "I'm in this for the money."³² Controversy paid well. The blessing, dated January 17, 1844, purports to be from Joseph Smith Jr. to his son Joseph Smith III, with the purpose of appointing the young Joseph as his successor. After promising the RLDS Church the landmark find, Hofmann quickly sold it to the LDS Church. The double deal would effectively end his short-lived relationship with the Missouri church and begin to sow the seeds of distrust among collectors familiar with the surrounding events. Yet, whatever reservations were held regarding the young dealer, they weren't significant enough to prevent further sales or solicitations. Hofmann proceeded to forge desirable documents bearing the names of those instrumental in the formation of the early Mormon movement. In addition to his holographic frauds during this period, Hofmann successfully counterfeited several rare denominations of early Mormon gold currency and produced an alarming amount of fraudulent territorial scrip.³³

Where the mild controversy found in the Joseph Smith III blessing had proved lucrative, fear would surely pay more. Beginning in 1983, Hofmann veered his counterfeiting efforts into forging a series of unrelenting attacks upon the credibility of both Joseph Smith and the foundations of the Book of Mormon. Three of Hofmann's most infamous documents were produced between 1983 and 1985, each representing an assault upon a key component of the Book of Mormon historical triad.

The first, a letter from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell,³⁴ which purported to predate Hofmann's Anthon Transcript as the earliest written document from Smith's hand, solidified Smith's cognitive connection between the act of treasure seeking and the sudden appearance of occult spirits. The second, the so-called "Salamander letter,"³⁵ took language from E. D. Howe's 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*³⁶ and placed it directly on the lips of Martin Harris as Harris rehearses the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to fellow saint W. W. Phelps, but replaces the traditional angelic figure of Moroni with that of a toadish white salamander.

The third, a once authentic 1772 land deed, Hofmann hand altered to read 1822, and in fresh ink supplied signatures of both Sidney Rigdon and Solomon Spaulding, thus establishing the previously unproven relationship between the two men that critics had long hypothesized would account for the authorship of the Book of Mormon.³⁷

Perhaps more shocking than the content of his forgeries is the fact that Hofmann's fakes were gaining the unequivocal approval of the world's leading fraud experts. From the FBI to lauded New

³¹ For a full transcription of this document, see Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1984), 565–66. For a forensic rebuttal of this document by George J. Throckmorton, see Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 539–40. See also: Turley, *Victims*, 40–57

³² Peggy Fletcher, "Hunting for LDS Documents: An Interview with Mark Hofmann," *Sunstone Review* 2, no. 9 (September 1982): 17.

³³ Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 545.

³⁴ For a full transcription of this document, see Lindsey, *Gathering of Saints*, 101–2. For a forensic response to this document, see Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 542–43. See also: Turley, *Victims*, 76

³⁵ For a full transcript of this document, see Lindsey, *Gathering of Saints*, 118–19. For a forensic response to this document, see Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 544. See also: Turley, *Victims*, 79–111

³⁶ E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, a Faithful Account of that Singular Imposition and Delusion, from its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville: self-published, 1834).

³⁷ Lindsey, *Gathering of Saints*, 177. For a forensic response to this document, see Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 548–49.

York forgery savant Charles Hamilton, Hofmann's combination of period appropriate paper and homemade ink, placed even the most respected of professional skeptics at ease.³⁸

As Hofmann's creations grew more lavish in nature, his lifestyle soon followed. By the fall of 1985, he was in enormous debt. On October 15, 1985, with clients unpaid, creditors circling, and a number of high-profile frauds nearing discovery, he executed a plot to secure himself additional time. Hofmann entered the Judge Building in downtown Salt Lake that morning, leaving a packaged pipe bomb at the office door of document collector and customer Steven Christensen. Later that day, he left a second bomb at the home of Christensen's business partner Gary Sheets. Tragically effective, the explosives claimed the lives of both Christensen and Sheets's wife, Kathleen—she being the first to discover the package outside the couple's home.

The following day a third bomb, perhaps undelivered, detonated inside Hofmann's own car, sending a battered Hofmann to the ground and burning documents through the streets of Salt Lake City. On February 4, 1986, Hofmann was arrested for the murders of Steven Christensen and Kathleen Sheets.³⁹

The Aftermath of Hofmann

With Hofmann behind bars, experts began the arduous task of sifting through hundreds of suspected forgeries and comparing notes. Forensic analysis, led by longtime Utah crime technician and respected document analyst George Throckmorton, uncovered a series of revealing characteristics within Hofmann's suspected forgeries that helped unravel much of the historical challenge. He found that upon being placed under ultraviolet light, Hofmann documents would emit a distinctive blue glow, the likely result of Hofmann's use of hydrogen peroxide and ammonium hydroxide to artificially advance the aged appearance of his iron-gall ink. Throckmorton also observed that under microscopic evaluation, an accelerated cracking was prominent in Hofmann's ink, an effect not found in genuine inks of the period.⁴⁰ Charles Hamilton observed that Hofmann's forgeries often displayed what Hamilton came to term the "common denominator syndrome"; specifically, the appearance of an identical spacing, shaping, and slanting of both letters and words in the writings of purportedly separate authors. Hamilton pointed to the purported penmanship of Daniel Boone, Lucy Mack Smith, and Martin Harris noting that each bear identical characteristics in the forgeries of Hofmann. This almost too obvious of a tell, which Hamilton believed "required no more than five minutes" to observe, would undoubtedly have been discovered sooner had it not been for Hofmann's obscenely prolific output.⁴¹ By sending document examiners scrambling in opposite directions to verify his finds individually, rarely did any of his holographs appear together long enough for this phenomenon to be detected. Had time afforded the luxury of such expert collaboration, it is likely that Mark Hofmann would today be a mere footnote in the story of Mormon forgery.

Hofmann's Second Act

³⁸ Charles Hamilton, *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes* (Lakewood, CO: Glenbridge Publishing, 1996), 271–72.

³⁹ Lindsey, *Gathering of Saints*, 293.

⁴⁰ Sillitoe and Roberts, *Salamander*, 533–34.

⁴¹ Hamilton, *Great Forgers*, 278–81.

With Hofmann behind bars, focus turned not only to the documents he produced, but to published works in Mormon history that incorporated them.⁴² The vast majority of publications that had printed Hofmann documents during this period were academic journals. Yet two key works on the Mormon past had fallen victim in 1984: Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery's biography of Emma Smith, *Mormon Enigma*,⁴³ and Dean Jessee's *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*.⁴⁴ Of the pair, Jessee's volume stood as the most compromised, the comprehensive volume of Joseph's writings having incorporated six of Hofmann's most significant fakes. Curt Bench, then head of the Deseret Book rare book department, sought to preserve the significant work and issued an errata sheet for the *Personal Writings*, a document that outlined for store customers exactly which of the documents inside were known Hofmann forgeries. *Mormon Enigma* would have to wait ten years for a second edition to rid itself of Hofmann's words.⁴⁵

While purging Mormon history of Hofmann's known forgeries was a straight-forward task, eliminating his undisclosed fakes has been a persistent challenge. In 2010 it was discovered that three landmark works on the Mountain Meadows Massacre had used an affidavit that had been deposited into the archives of the Utah State Historical Society in 1983.⁴⁶ The document purports to be a 1924 reminiscence of William Edwards, a Beaver County postmaster who, at the age of fifteen during the events, was the youngest participant in the massacre. Questions surrounding the document's authenticity arose during historian Polly Aird's review in the *Journal of Mormon History* of David L. Bigler and Will Bagley's book *Innocent Blood*, a documentary history of the massacre that reproduces the erroneous Edwards affidavit in its entirety.⁴⁷ In her review of *Innocent Blood*, Aird first raised the possibility of Hofmann's involvement, which provoked extensive scrutiny of the document by Aird and associates, and culminated in a definitive published analysis by Richard Turley and Brian D. Reeves, which revealed a modern origin as well as a previously undisclosed connection to Hofmann.⁴⁸

Mormon Forgery Today

Advancement in technology has revised the landscape of document acquisition. Simultaneously, it has accelerated the creation and proliferation of exceptional forgeries. Tools unthinkable to yesteryear's con artists have today become household items, and the means to produce fraudulent articles threatens to outpace the time consuming and often costly ability to verify an item's authenticity. Complicating the issue further, the emergence of internet auction houses has all but marked the death

⁴² For the most comprehensive list of suspected Hofmann forgeries published to date, see: Turley, *Victims*, 346-394

⁴³ Linda K. Newell and Valeen T. Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, Prophet's Wife, "Elect Lady," Polygamy's Foe, 1804-1879* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1984), 186-87.

⁴⁴ Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1984), 223-26, 277, 278, 358-59, 565-66, 596-98, 616-18.

⁴⁵ Linda K. Newell and Valeen T. Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith, 2nd ed.* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 140, 143, 346; David L. Bigler and Will Bagley, *Innocent Blood: Essential Narratives of the Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark, 2008), 422-23; Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 191, 257, 345.

⁴⁷ Bigler and Bagley, *Innocent Blood*, 422-23.

⁴⁸ Polly Aird, "Review of *Innocent Blood: Essential Narratives of the Mountain Meadows Massacre*, by David L. Bigler and Will Bagley," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 263; Richard E. Turley, and Brian D. Reeves, "Unmasking Another Hofmann Forgery," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (2011): x-xiv.

of accepted provenance, a once indispensable tracing tool used in the identification of authentic or duplicitous items. Tens of thousands of items of asserted Mormon historical import enter the market yearly and pour into the hands of collectors. Many of these collectors will, later in life, generously gift their collections over to respected research archives, fully devoid of mention as to their means of acquisition. In this increasingly impersonal process, the knowledge of the archivist, academic, or dealer, positions that once served as a traditional safeguard against the sale of frauds into the marketplace, have been bypassed, and the often-dubious stories attached to internet offerings by anonymous sellers are fast tracked into the canon of history.

The first genre of Mormon history to fall prey to this form of internet counterfeiting was that of historical photographs. What began as online sellers writing prominent Mormon names upon unidentified nineteenth-century portrait cards bearing slight resemblance to their newfound subject soon morphed into the creation of digitally created images being added to period appropriate card stock and aged. These would then be sold at premium prices to unsuspecting collectors and institutions. More alarming still, these forged images began to be deposited into the holdings of prominent archives, and their authentic versions illegally removed and sold.⁴⁹

While document reproduction and provenance falsification plague this century, a second, more familiar threat stands in wait to again torment the Mormon historical community: the reemergence of Mark Hofmann forgeries once buried in private collections. Presumably, there exists a significant body of material belonging to those clients of Hofmann in the mid-1980s who were not anxious to have their investments possibly labeled as worthless. The breadth of Hofmann's body of sales among private collectors is one of the least explored areas of his career. In my capacity as a rare book dealer, I began noticing a growing trend emerge in the mid-2000s of former clients of Hofmann's passing away and their document collections being dispersed. In my experience, the heirs of these collections are often unaware of the collection's connection to Hofmann. While a handful of these often-monumental collections have revealed Hofmann's name buried between the pages of a document in the form of a business card (as was the case in a collection I evaluated for purchase in the late 2000s), it is unreasonable to believe that the vast majority of this newly emerging material will be as forthcoming. The reintroduction of Hofmann forgeries, a process currently in motion, stands to create an enormous amount of chaos in the current century if institutional curators and specialist dealers are unmindful of the increasing phenomenon.

On January 22, 2002, a discovery echoing the Oliver Cowdery forgeries published a century prior came to light along the banks of the Colorado River. In a region known today as Lees Ferry, an inscribed lead sheet purporting to be an 1872 confession of John D. Lee was unearthed under the hearth of Lee's Ferry Fort. Lee, who had taken an ecclesiastically appointed exile in the region after the nation's reconstruction era had yielded a renewed interest in the tragic events of September 1857. Like Turney's Cowdery forgery, this new discovery read painfully formulaic. The purported confession directly implicated President Brigham Young of ordering the Mountain Meadows Massacre via the precise channels of communication theorized in nearly every published non-Mormon treatment of the massacre to date. George Throckmorton, whose forensic work had proved invaluable in unclocking Hofmann

⁴⁹ Ashley Stilson, "Two Rare LDS Books Still Missing after Man Pleads Guilty to Stealing from BYU Library," *Daily Herald*, last modified January 22, 2019, https://www.heraldextra.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/two-rare-lds-books-still-missing-after-man-pleads-guilty-to-stealing-from-byu-library/article_a406d2cf-8b6e-55e4-b996-e1c10b802409.html.

documents just two decades prior, was hired by the National Park Service to critically evaluate the lead sheet. After examination, Throckmorton concluded that the evidence of forgery was “overwhelming.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

With documents relating to the Mormon past drawing more money and interest than in all previous periods combined, there is no shortage of demand for forgeries to reshape Mormon history. The desire to enter the Mormon past via deceptive means is an act that we can expect to see continually repeat itself. The complexities facing the Mormon historical community in this century run no deeper than challenges to its archival integrity. This will necessarily result in an enhanced working relationship between those involved on the front lines of document discovery and acquisition, be they archivists, dealers, or collectors, and the work of historians and skilled forensic specialists -- their contributions becoming increasingly indispensable. This collaborative approach toward the protection of the historical record at all levels will prove crucial in forestalling each of the periods of Mormon forgery mentioned above from coalescing in our modern era with unprecedented sophistication and volume.

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⁵⁰ Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets*, 383