

“The Truth Is the Most Important Thing”: The New Mormon History According to Mark Hofmann

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ON 23 JANUARY 1987, an unemotional Mark W. Hofmann entered the Utah State Prison after pleading guilty to two counts of murder and two counts of theft by deception before third District Judge Kenneth Rigrup. The judge sentenced Hofmann to a single five-year-to-life term and three lesser one-to-fifteen year terms, bringing to a dramatic end the sensational career of Mormonism's most celebrated and controversial document dealer.

As part of his guilty plea, Hofmann admitted forging and fraudulently selling the famed 1830 Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps or white salamander letter, as well as selling the mysterious, probably nonexistent McLellin collection. With this confession, Hofmann partially answered a question that has burned in the minds of believers in and students of Mormonism: Are the Hofmann-discovered documents authentic historical finds or ingenious forgeries? The answer to this question has important ramifications for both nineteenth-century and recent Mormon history.

In exchange for a reduced sentence on one murder and concurrent rather than consecutive sentences, Hofmann agreed to disclose the details of his dark career, a promise the public viewed skeptically but awaited anxiously. When the 571-page transcript of the interviews was released 31 July 1987, it seemed to raise as many questions as it answered. To close observers, crucial parts of Hofmann's testimony appeared incomplete, evasive, inconsistent, or simply incredible.

In published interviews before the bombings and in numerous places in the transcript, Hofmann said he dealt documents solely for financial gain. However, since Hofmann has proven himself to be a master deceiver and skillful liar, we must weigh his words against his actions in this claim, as in all others.

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The question of whether Hofmann created history-challenging documents for financial gain or whether his agenda included the undermining of Mormonism through its historical Achilles heel deserves close scrutiny. This is especially true since the Hofmann documents have had great impact on how many perceive Mormonism and their own lives in relation to it.

It is the intent of this paper to explore the question of motive in the forgery of early Mormon holographs. At the onset, I want to make it clear that I accept Hofmann's confessions, together with the extensive forensic evidence presented in the preliminary hearing of April and May, 1986, along with the research that Linda Sillitoe and I have done, as documentation that all the key documents dealt by Hofmann, as well as numerous others, are forgeries.

Hofmann's forged Americana, including the "Oath of a Free Man," fit as neatly into American history as his early documents did into Mormon history (Interviews, Exhibit Q). None contained revisionist content, and many were highly profitable. Why, then, since Hofmann could make money from either testimonial or controversial Mormon documents, did he produce documents of a revisionistic nature — which were actually impossible to sell to some of his best customers?

In answering this question, I hope to shed light on several historical themes found in key Hofmann documents, upon their author and his intent, and then analyze both the man and his career in relation to Mormon history.

Mark Hofmann's documents influenced our perceptions of Church founder Joseph Smith in several ways. Most dramatic, perhaps, was the portrayal of Joseph as a professional money-digger. At least six Hofmann documents promote the old anti-Mormon accusation that Joseph Smith was heavily involved in money-digging or treasure-seeking, an activity thought by many to be inconsistent with his role as God's prophet.

1. The 1825 letter from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell describes treasure-seeking in Joseph's own words to a family friend, offering advice on divining with a hazel stick (Interviews, Exhibit E). Supposedly the earliest Joseph Smith holograph, written in his nineteenth year, this document shows Joseph to be not just a young dabbler, as suggested in Joseph's own history, but an experienced, professional treasure-seeker. The document's content was consistent with both friendly and hostile sources describing the Smiths' involvement in this activity.

2. The 1825 Money-Digging "Articles of Agreement" relates essentially the same treasure-seeking arrangement as the Stowell letter. The LDS Church obtained it from Steven F. Christensen through Gordon B. Hinckley in 1983, but it was not yet known in the historical community and remains unpublished. An early version of the contract had been published on 23 April 1880 in the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Hofmann, evidently, had rediscovered the original document, which differed slightly from the earlier published version. Only a typescript of the document was sold to murder victim Christensen for \$5,000 including "all literary and property rights" soon after he paid \$40,000 for the salamander letter and began a research project to describe early Mormon origins.

The contract lent credibility to the salamander letter and later to the Stowell letter, both of unusual but parallel content. As we will see, this formula of using a forgery to substantiate or even authenticate another forgery was a hallmark ploy of Hofmann.

3. The 1838 Joseph Smith "Treasure revelation" to Hyrum Smith, dated 25 May 1838, is an eight-line, one-sentence revelation addressed to "Hiram" Smith. The Lord promises that if "Hiram . . . will come strateaway to Far West (Missouri) and inquire of his brother it shall be shown him how that he may be freed from de(b)t and obtain a grate treasure in the earth" (Jessee 1984, 358-59).

The document's significance rests on the interpretation of this promise, which seems to suggest a treasure-hunting venture to obtain financial gain. It has raised considerable comment among historians, who have used various contextual arguments to support divergent views. The revelation is believable for its subtlety. It underscores the nontraditional view that Joseph Smith's mind was occupied with treasure-seeking, even as a mature president-prophet. Historically, the letter is dated a few days after Joseph and others found Indian mounds which they believed contained ancient treasure.

4. The 1830 white salamander letter of Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps is the most fertile document to come from Hofmann's pen (Interviews, Exhibit 0). Each phrase contains undismissible implications for students of Mormon origins. The letter substantially affects historical understandings of Martin Harris, Joseph Smith, and the veracity of Mormon genesis. Perhaps more than any other influence in the 1980s to date, this document has been the catalyst for concentrated study of nineteenth-century folk religion, white magic, and money-digging. The document has placed Joseph Smith's character under extensive scrutiny, since Harris connects him with seerstones, enchantments, elusive tricksters, and repeated allusions to money, treasure, and gold. The overtones are clearly more secular than sacred.

Historians, scholars, and collectors took sides over the letter's authenticity and meaning. Mormon historians were surprisingly accommodating, perhaps because the "new" view of Joseph Smith had already been presented in Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1945), A. C. Lambert's files in the University of Utah's special collections, chapters of a recently published book by Dale Morgan (1986), and several nineteenth-century primary accounts. The letter came so close to E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834) that Jerald Tanner suggested Howe as a source, a surmise which Hofmann has since confirmed.

Other possible sources for the letter are as varied as A. E. Hoffman's fantasy "The Golden Flower Pot" (1967) and research notes prepared by Hofmann's friends. The letter's intent seems to be to place Joseph Smith squarely in the shadowy milieu of money-digging.

5. Evidence recovered during the investigation suggests that Hofmann intended to create or was creating some of the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon. He discussed the pages frequently and did an extremely detailed study of the content and language of the Book of Mormon. His own forgeries

provided samples of Martin Harris's handwriting, and he procured a photograph of Emma Smith's handwriting, both of which would be needed to authenticate the pages penned by Joseph's two earliest scribes.

Hofmann pursued a set of 116 pages in Bakersfield, California, but later said that what he found was a forgery. He provided two pages of his notes to collector Brent Ashworth. He told another friend, Brent Metcalfe, about the Bakersfield forgery and referred to another set of pages that "might be real." He gave Metcalfe quotes from the "Book of Lehi" over the telephone. Metcalfe, who had shared his own ideas with Mark, found Hofmann's quotes remarkably consistent with a "theology of money-digging" that Metcalfe saw in the Book of Mormon.

One quote from page four of Hofmann's "Book of Lehi" notes reads, "[God] should cause to be found certain treasures in the hole of the earth, and out of the earth the righteous shall prosper." On pages 5 and 6, salt mines, gold, silver and jewels are mentioned.

The present monetary worth of the 116 pages would have been inestimable, and several Church leaders actually expressed an interest in them. A journal entry written 28 June 1985 by Steven F. Christensen recounts how Elder Hugh Pinnock asked Hofmann to find the pages. Hofmann needed no invitation, however, since that discovery was a very early stated goal.

6. The 1829 letter by Lucy Mack Smith to Mary Pierce which surfaced in 1982 was welcomed enthusiastically by the Church (Interviews, Exhibit D). In it, the Prophet's mother offers a religious context for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and describes her son's translation process. It even alludes to material from the lost 116 pages. Hofmann's testimonial letters from Martin Harris and David Whitmer to Walter Conrad also appeared in 1982 capping a three-year period during which Hofmann was pedestaled and honored as the discoverer of hallowed proofs of the validity of historical Mormon claims. The money-digging documents began to surface the following year.

The key Hofmann documents — real and unseen — after 1983 introduced several other themes at odds with traditional history. The salamander and Stowell letters portrayed Joseph Smith as a practitioner of folk religion, familiar with the occult. Indeed, USU Institute instructor Rhett James cryptically observed of the Hofmann document phenomenon that there arose a sort of evangelistic spirit among historians that may have overwhelmed their historical objectivity. It became fashionable to think in terms of folk magic.

Most disturbing, the salamander letter replaced the numinous personage Moroni with a pugnacious "white salamander in the bottom of the hole" that transfigures itself into a spirit, strikes Joseph three times, asks him to bring his brother Alvin, who is dead, and intones, "I tricked you," when he interferes with Joseph's ability to see in his "stone" as the "Old Spirit" directed (Interviews, Exhibit O).

Yet LDS historians found contextual support for the salamander and money digging letters, and even spiritual connotations to explain the allusions to magic. Historian D. Michael Quinn has declared that God has, in every millennia, had his prophets employ what we call magic in manifesting God's

mysterious works. Despite the accommodation of the religio-occultic phenomenon by Mormon historians, members and Church leaders never became comfortable with the strange revelations in these letters.

Another "Hofmann document" in substance, though not in physical reality, deposed Joseph in favor of his brother Alvin. The Oliver Cowdery history, as reported in the *Salt Lake Tribune* 15 May 1985 and *Los Angeles Times* 13 June 1985, recorded that Alvin first found the gold plates and encountered a "taunting salamander" that prevented him from taking them from the hill. The history, supposedly dictated by Joseph Smith to Cowdery in 1830 or 31, was painstakingly described by Hofmann's friend and Christensen's former employee, Brent Metcalfe, as related to him by an "unidentified source."

Although no historian, archivist, or Church leader could confirm the existence of the history, neither could any definitively state it did not exist since Joseph Fielding Smith had once referred to similar records written in Cowdery's hand (Smith 1952, 1:106). The lack of deniability undoubtedly frustrated Church leaders who know neither the source nor the whereabouts of the volume. Their confusion had the appearance of a cover-up to Oliver Cowdery history well-wishers and seemed to enhance the possibility that the volume existed.

If authentic, the Cowdery history would have had a major revisionistic impact on the role of Joseph Smith, and therein lies a motive. The secret source told the *Los Angeles Times*, "The Cowdery history and the role it gives Alvin Smith lends further credibility to the documents disclosed earlier, which portray Joseph Smith's involvement in occult methods to find hidden treasure without any references to religious events so familiar to present-day Mormons." Religion writer John Dart added that "the source said he decided to be interviewed about the history because the Cowdery documents provide corroboration for the salamander references in the Harris letter, which some Mormons are claiming is a forgery."

The source for the news article was none other than Mark Hofmann, publicly bolstering his earlier forgeries from behind the scenes. In addition, Hofmann supported the occult and treasure-seeking implications of the salamander and Stowell letters, diminished Joseph Smith's role from founding father of Mormonism to a second-string prophet, eroded the veracity of the official Church history, (including Smith's 1838 account contained in the Pearl of Great Price), and gave credence to anti-Mormon charges, once dismissed by the Church because of obvious bias.

My emphasis on the above documents, which appeared between 1983 and 1985 following the Church-affirming 1982 finds, does not preclude revisionist content in early Hofmann forgeries. Hofmann sold the 1844 Joseph Smith III blessing to the Church in 1981 a year after the Anthon transcript appeared (Interviews, Exhibit B). The blessing from Joseph Smith to his son promises "even that the anointing of the progenitor shall be upon the head of my son, and his seed after him, from generation to generation."

Possible source documents for the blessing include an 1835 blessing given to Joseph Smith III by Joseph Smith, Sr., in Kirtland and recalled by Lucy

Mack Smith, and the testimony in the Temple Lot Suit of the 1890s, a document Hofmann is known to have studied. The blessing, penned in the handwriting of clerk Thomas Bullock, was supported by an 1865 letter from Bullock to Brigham Young, also a forgery. The letter includes the phrase “I will not surrender that blessing.” It expresses concern for the safety of the blessing if it is given to Brigham Young and by implication confirms the appropriateness of father-to-son succession. Thus, the two Bullock documents imply that LDS prophets function without divine authority. The Church quietly received the Bullock letter from Hofmann after the Joseph Smith III blessing was traded to the RLDS Church. The letter has not been released to the public.

Hofmann documents began affecting the writing of historians in small but sometimes significant ways. For example, Hofmann’s Joseph Smith III blessing caused authors Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery to omit from their book *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (1984) a chapter on evidence that Joseph, indeed, blessed his son.

Another Hofmann forgery, Joseph’s letter to Maria and Sarah Lawrence (Jessee 1984, 596–97) ripped at old wounds. In 1844, Joseph Smith wrote of a claim against him “for adultery on the testimony of William Law” (HC 6:403). Law claimed to have caught Joseph and Maria Lawrence in a compromising situation in October 1843 and again on 1 January 1844. Law was outraged because Joseph was legal guardian and part executor (with Law and Hyrum Smith) of the Lawrence sisters’ estate, valued at more than \$7,000. The Hofmann letter may have been intended to focus attention on this controversial episode.

Rumored Hofmann documents — those that Hofmann discussed but that have thus far not surfaced — point to various Church leaders as promiscuous and/or bigoted. These include letters purportedly by or about Joseph Smith and polygamy and one from Brigham Young to Charles C. Rich regarding an accusation that Apostle Rich had committed adultery with a black woman servant. In the letter, Young supposedly wrote, “What a man does with his own property is his own business,” an apparent condoning of adultery, bi-racial sex, probable sexual exploitation, and bigotry.

The last Joseph Smith holograph forged by Hofmann was from the Prophet to General Jonathan Dunham of the Nauvoo Legion (Interviews, Exhibit G). This note written from Carthage Jail shows Joseph as desperate, rather than as a willing martyr who went “like a lamb to the slaughter.” In it, Smith orders Dunham to “proceed without delay” to Carthage with the Nauvoo Legion to rescue Smith and his compatriots who are “in the hands of our sworn enemies.”

Hofmann’s first known forged document is the text, in letter form, of a second anointing blessing. Dated on the reverse side “c. 1912,” this blessing provided the text of a highly confidential temple ritual reserved for the Mormon elite. In 1979 Hofmann brought this to A. J. Simmonds, director of Utah State University Special Collections, along with two photocopied pages from Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*, stating that no text of a second anointing blessing was known to exist (1945, 280–81). Hofmann’s copy was, obviously, one of a kind. Yet he sold it to Simmonds for only \$60.

What's interesting is that in June 1978, a young man had brought it to the Utah Lighthouse Ministry and allowed Sandra Tanner to photocopy it. He said it was his grandfather's blessing. The fact that Hofmann forged the document very early and sold it months before he took the Anthon transcript to the Church is significant. So sensitive is the topic of second anointings that a recent article by David Buerger published in *DIALOGUE* (1983) contributed to Buerger's current expulsion from the Church archives.

My final example — though others exist — is the Amos Spaulding land deed, a contract dated 19 January 1822, which bears the signatures of both Solomon Spaulding and Sidney Rigdon. One of Hofmann's worst forgeries, technically speaking, the document filled a purpose in convincing Elder Hugh Pinnock that the McLellin collection — of which the land deed was supposedly a part — could be extremely damaging to the institutional Church. One of the earliest and most popular attempts to discredit the Book of Mormon was a claim that Joseph Smith plagiarized the book from a historical romance called "Manuscript Story" written in about 1812 by the Reverend Solomon Spaulding of Conneaut, Ohio (Spaulding 1885). Spaulding's volume was supposedly then altered and doctrinally enhanced by Sidney Rigdon. The Church replied that Spaulding and Rigdon never met. Bruce R. McConkie asserted that "Sidney Rigdon had nothing whatever to do with the preparation of the Book of Mormon and he never so much as saw Joseph Smith until after the publication of that book" (McConkie 1966, 749).

However, this land deed, signed by both men, works to disprove the traditional Mormon assertion that Rigdon and Spaulding were not acquainted. After Pinnock saw the document, book dealer Steve Barnett noticed the anachronistic date (Spaulding, who had died in 1816, couldn't have written in 1822) and bought the deed at a greatly reduced price for the Rigdon signature alone.

Both Pinnock and Christensen believed the McLellin collection contained other threatening documents, including an affidavit from Emma Smith that names Joseph's visit from Moroni as his first experience with the divine, thus omitting the First Vision. Both men played a role in helping Hofmann obtain a bank loan to purchase the collection and donate it to the Church.

The number and significance of these documents strongly suggests that Hofmann's motive in forging Mormon documents involved more than money. In assessing that motive, we must look at the man as well as his products. Once again, we must weigh his actions against his words.

Some associates of Hofmann believed he knew little about history. Yet with others he discussed a wealth of Mormon minutiae. Some believed he valued history, while others argued that if he did, he wouldn't sell to private collectors, including the Church. Yet he destroyed an authentic and valuable Egyptian papyrus, altered real documents, stole others, and created fakes. Many saw him as a believing, active Mormon, but his close circle of friends knew he was not a believer. More important, Hofmann's philosophy, as expressed to close friends, was based on what he called pragmatism, a fundamentally amoral, self-serving system of convenience.

Hofmann made no secret of his relationship with several Church leaders, most notably President Gordon B. Hinckley, at first Council of the Twelve advisor to the Historical Department and later a counselor in the First Presidency. He did keep secret his relationships with evangelical critics and scholars the Church would view as anti-Mormon — though he confided to them many secrets supposedly gleaned through his contacts at Church headquarters and his rumored access to the First Presidency's vault.

Those who saw his handwriting — or rather his block printing, for he rarely wrote in cursive — doubted he could forge the flowing script apparent in the letters he sold. Evidence and his testimony show that he had the technical knowledge, the equipment, the manual ability, and the careful schooling he needed to produce the documents. What's more, he knew how to research, how to profit from others' research and ideas, and how to cover his tracks.

Evidence in the preliminary hearing linked Mark Hofmann to several pseudonyms, most commonly "Mike Hansen." "Mike Hansen" ordered printing plates for documents Mark Hofmann sold, sometimes giving Hofmann's telephone number or paying with Hofmann's personal check. Shortly before Mark Hofmann killed two people, "Mike Hansen" also bought batteries and mercury switches like those used to make the pipe bombs that killed Steve Christensen and Kathy Sheets.

A survey of call slips in the book section of special collections at the University of Utah yielded some interesting finds. Beginning in 1976, the year Mark returned from his mission, Mark Hofmann or M. W. Hofmann filled out a number of call slips. Several, as early as 1979, were signed by "Mike Hansen." Document analyst George Throckmorton found that all the "Mike Hansen" signatures in evidence were written by the same person. Thus, by 1979, the year Mark Hofman married, the year he offered two forged documents, and the year before he discovered the Anthon transcript, he apparently had reason to sign a pseudonym when he checked out rare books on Mormon money and other topics.

Not only did Mark Hofmann "create" Mormon history manually and theoretically, he made it personally. Some Hofmann forgeries bolstered members' faith; others are said to have damaged faith. The tension long felt between the institutional Church and its history may be reinforced by the Hofmann forgeries, since Church leaders can now point to the negative consequences of examining history and questioning traditional views. Church leaders may reiterate the admonition to separate matters of faith from those of history, or justify, as Elder Dallin Oaks did, the institutionally controlled "use of truth" (Oaks 1985).

However, while Hofmann's documents may be identified and dismissed, his longest-lasting impact may be that he opened a Pandora's box of renewed interest in Mormon history. Many are researching, writing, and questioning comfortable assumptions. Historians have found contextual support for Hofmann's documents, just as he believed they would. But they no longer have his own primary, holographic documents to legitimize their revisionist conclusions.

In recognizing the forgeries and forger, we say good-bye to a veritable "Hall of Fame" of superlative documents. They include:

1. The earliest Joseph Smith holograph
2. The very last Joseph Smith holograph
3. The earliest Lucy Mack Smith holograph
4. The earliest Martin Harris holograph, plus three other handwriting samples from a man who had previously left none
5. The earliest history in the Church (i.e., the Cowdery History)
6. The only document signed by Solomon Spaulding and Sidney Rigdon
7. The only second anointing holograph
8. The original Anthon transcript
9. Deseret currency, handwritten white notes (early Utah currency) and Spanish Fork co-op notes, unknown in Hofmann's types and denominations
10. The first document ever printed in America (and its twin)

It is easy now in retrospect to say, "No one could have really found all of those documents." But at the time, no one other than Hofmann knew the totality of this list; and, more importantly, Hofmann was in most circles highly trusted.

We say hello to an enigma. Mark Hofmann was raised in the Church, filled a mission, married in the temple, associated with Church authorities, maintained a current temple recommend, and fathered four children, one while he was a murder suspect. Many thought they knew him; few think so now.

As a college undergraduate, Mark wrote a theme in the form of a letter to his mother. In it, he protested what he saw as Church duplicity and secrecy, particularly surrounding its history. Writing with the arrogance and absolutism commonly associated with youth, he suggested an obviously felt chasm between what Church members really think and how they participate in the Church. He insisted that the Church could withstand the exposures of history, that honesty was best for individuals and organizations. It is telling that he did not express his own religious beliefs.

On 29 April 1979, the date on that letter, Mark Hofmann had already tried his hand at forging. He was familiar with both traditional and highly critical approaches to Mormon history. He had delved into many "mysteries" and, through his systematic reading in special collections, was delving into more. He wrote to his mother, "My conviction is that the truth is the most important thing. Our idea of reality should be consistent with it."

One of the great ironies is that through forging documents, which in Hofmann's mind filled the voids in Mormon history, he manipulated and distorted history. In the process he negated his own search for truth and complicated ours.

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