

The Successful Marketing of the Holy Grail

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NOT LONG AGO AT A CONVENTION in Salt Lake City for police chiefs, a visiting law enforcer dubbed Utah a “white-collar crime capital.” He was alluding to pyramid schemes and speculative investments initiated by unscrupulous LDS individuals preying upon the trust between people with cultural and religious bonds. Professional concern about involvement of LDS leaders in fraudulent businesses such as AFCO focused on these men’s impact on rank and file member-investors, rather than upon the possibility of naiveté among the top Church elders. The participation of the victimized was at issue as well as the proclivities of the perpetrators.

Though no mention was made of old letters and early Mormon money, that market too involved speculative investments and high finance, as well as that most valuable currency—trust. For sale were many tangible bits of Mormon history. In Church offices, antique book departments, and conservative businesses, a fragmented community was involved in an increasingly inflated, highly competitive trade in Mormon documents. Information in media and scholarly publications soon reached an audience beyond that core of secretive document and book dealing. The salamander became a cultural folk creature that was soon relegated to myth following the Salt Lake bombings and the subsequent detection of forgery. These events raise questions not only for a court of law or a parole board, but for all of us who are part of a participating consciousness.

At a recent symposium at Brigham Young University, Robert Stott, lead prosecutor in the murder and forgery cases against Mark Hofmann, castigated Mormon historians and researchers for hindering the investigation by insisting upon the authenticity of the Hofmann documents and by being generally reluctant to cooperate with the investigation. My own familiarity with the

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history community and its attitudes, my impressions from hundreds of interviews regarding the bombings and forgeries, and my own mixed feelings have left me acutely aware of the chasm of suspicion and hostility between the history and law enforcement camps.

In acknowledging that the many kinds and degrees of denial prominent among historians and researchers did complicate the prosecution of Mark Hofmann, it is only fair to emphasize that the history community unconsciously reacted to the investigation as fraud victims typically react — by denying they are victims and by accusing the investigators of creating the problems. Those close to murder typically react quite differently, by seeking protection, disclosing potentially damaging information, and expressing outrage. These murders erupted within the framework of a complex, secrecy-laced scam, which ultimately robbed many people in tangible and intangible ways. Nothing about the forgeries or bombings case has been simple, including the response of a well-educated and law-abiding community within which the unthinkable happened.

When Mark Hofmann was injured by a bomb of his own making 16 October 1985, the day after he killed Steven F. Christensen and Kathleen W. Sheets with similar bombs, people interested in Mormon history knew him as an extraordinary document dealer. His success depended not only upon the skill with which he researched and forged, but also upon his manipulation of public and private perceptions. To understand how this occurred, we need to take a step back — for perspective — and look at assumptions common at the time.

By the time Mark Hofmann returned from his mission in January 1976, professional LDS historians had been officially writing Mormon history for several years. However, Church leaders were giving mixed reviews to the efforts of Leonard Arrington's History Division. The sesquicentennial sixteen-volume history of the Church, scheduled to begin appearing in 1980, was abandoned as a project, Arrington was released, and research historians were moved to BYU. Despite criticism, the energy to write a new Mormon history did not disappear, nor did the Church's mandate to collect and study history. These conflicting forces may have created a vacuum that historical documents and research, speculation, and testimonial declarations about them soon filled.

History is crucial in Mormonism and among Mormons. Why? First of all, the Mormon church is authoritative, and official accounts of its origin link the current prophet and president to divine guidance through Joseph Smith's first vision and subsequent revelations. The Book of Mormon, introduced by Joseph as an ancient record, adds another layer of history. Since the Church is young, scholarly debate and research have only begun, and the Mormon past is near and personal to many members. Finally, history is political. History is everyone's means to every end. For some, it reinforces testimony and policy; for others, history "proves" that the Church is true and investigators should join; at times history provides the precedent for change and the rejection of change; and history even attacks the Church's claims, which are based on canonized history.

Mark Hofmann knew what history meant to the orthodox collector, the high Church leader, the liberal scholar, and the outside critic. His tactics

between 1980–85 convinced historians and collectors in Mormon studies that primary, handwritten documents were abundantly discoverable. The documents of lesser importance than the few that made news stories gave his major discoveries credibility, and vice versa. His customers knew that they could lose out on something big if they didn't carefully maintain a relationship with Hofmann. During 1985, Hofmann's success in the national antiquities market bolstered his local reputation.

A few who dealt with Hofmann frequently had some idea how many documents flowed through his hands. But they rationalized his prolific sales, for they, too, had all in a fortunate moment found something interesting enough to carry a jolt of excitement. Hofmann, the story went, worked hard, had sufficient capital and time, developed original techniques, hired assistants, or had a spiritual gift to find Church documents. Repeatedly, scholars and collectors insisted that if they had Hofmann's time and money, they could find as much or more than Hofmann did.

Why did so many believe this illusion of plentiful, primary documents when very few handwritten documents penned by Church leaders before the railroad came to Utah have been found by anyone but Hofmann during the same years? For one thing, Hofmann's quiet demeanor, his reflection of the various Church-related values his associates held, and his suggestions of authentication procedures all inspired trust. In addition, the numbers of documents and Mormon currencies that were suddenly extant with no known link to Hofmann convinced many—including Church leaders, historians, and collectors—that the field of nineteenth-century documents was “white already to harvest.” We apparently lived within a historical restoration of all things.

Hofmann says he began counterfeiting and forging literally as a child. In any case, he burst spectacularly into the Mormon history market in April 1980 at the age of twenty-five. The Church was celebrating its sesquicentennial despite the absence of the sixteen-volume history, and despite a ruckus in the national and Utah press regarding the Mormon effort in several states to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment and the excommunication of Sonia Johnson. So closely linked were these events, that President Gordon B. Hinckley, first counselor in the First Presidency, conducted an April 1980 conference session televised from the David Whitmer cabin on Sunday and appeared on a national morning talk show the next day to deny that the Church was busing Relief Society sisters to legislatures in Illinois and Missouri.

Approximately two weeks later, Mark Hofmann brought to the office of the First Presidency a transcript apparently copied by Joseph Smith from the gold plates. This young man claimed to have looked into a Bible, which evidently belonged once to the Smith family, and had found a treasure. Church leaders were very excited, particularly because this event occurred on the Church's anniversary. In-house authorities examined the document, and then the Church called a press conference. “Good press” abounded, and the rest is history.

By now the Sunstone Symposium and other gatherings were pumping energy through the independent sector of Mormon culture, which had an abiding interest in the Church's restrictions on historical research. Hofmann

reinforced the growing suspicion that Church leaders would “grab-and-stash” controversial historical documents and then deny possession of them. Events surrounding the Church procurement of the 1825 Joseph Smith letter to Josiah Stowell particularly substantiated a mysterious variety of stories supporting that feeling. Many of those stories can be traced to Hofmann.

President Gordon B. Hinckley purchased the Stowell letter from Hofmann on 11 January 1983 for \$15,000. Only after the sale of the salamander letter in 1984 did the 1825 Stowell letter, also involving Joseph Smith in money-digging, become an open secret in the historical community. (A number of typed transcripts were mailed from New York in August 1984 to various people in the history community.) A showdown between the Church and scholars at the Mormon History Association meetings in May 1985 led to the release of the Stowell letter, very soon after the Church released the text of the salamander letter. The impact of the two letters on the general public was great. Despite the Church’s openness about the Salamander letter, the “grab-and-stash” assumption was validated by the Stowell letter. That belief became increasingly exploitable as the Oliver Cowdery history and McLellin collection myths soon demonstrated.

In short, by the time of the Salt Lake bombings, readers of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Deseret News*, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and other publications, and the historical community in general, believed that nineteenth-century primary documents were abundantly discoverable and highly valuable and that the Church would publicize or suppress those documents, depending on their content. Both impressions had an aspect of truth. Both were exaggerated, reinforced, and exploited by Mark Hofmann.

Hofmann’s distortions were supported by specific techniques used to market his forgeries. These four, used repeatedly, I call: (1) the shared discovery; (2) the self-identifying document; (3) cultural myths; and (4) preliminary discussion. Three of the four techniques were used with the Anthon transcript, the document that made a very minor forger of \$60 letters into a major Mormon document dealer.

Hofmann shared the discovery of the Anthon transcript with several people. First, his bride of a few months, Doralee, noticed that two Bible pages were stuck together. The Anthon transcript, the young couple discovered, was inside. The following day, Hofmann took the Bible and transcript to a friend, A. J. Simmonds, director of special collections at Utah State University where Hofmann was a student in his junior year. Simmonds excitedly helped Hofmann open the document and compare it with various texts. Immediately Hofmann took the transcript to LDS Institute instructor Danel Bachman, who then called LDS historian Dean Jessee, who, within days, said the Joseph Smith holograph on the reverse side was apparently authentic. A few days later, Hofmann, Bachman, and Church Historian Leonard Arrington showed the transcript to Elders Gordon B. Hinckley and Boyd K. Packer, and then to the First Presidency. Throughout the fuss that followed his discovery, Mark Hofmann appeared pleased, becomingly shy with Church leaders, and rather cautious. He let others make the claims.

The Anthon transcript introduced itself. Even when the young couple found the page folded in quarters and glued into the book, hieroglyphs and Joseph Smith's name were visible. Like the Bible itself, which included a handwritten portion signed by Samuel Smith, the transcript announced itself with the first glance. The more experts studied it, the more the Anthon transcript appeared to be authentic. The arrangement of hieroglyphs matched Charles Anthon's description. Smith had apparently described the process of copying the characters in a brief note on the reverse side; and the Bible had Smith family signatures.

Hofmann's story of the Anthon transcript echoed cultural myth. His discovery parallels that of the young Joseph Smith seeking guidance in the Bible and later finding the gold plates and founding the Church. But the Anthon Transcript story resonates further. Its discoverer is a worthy, poor young man, as shown by his status as a married pre-med student. He procures the Bible through good luck and friendship for only a few dollars, like a character in a Horatio Alger novel or a personal story in *The Ensign*. In some versions, Hofmann consecrates his find to the Church; in others, he receives a small compensation. (In fact, he received \$20,000 in trade. He quit college the same quarter as his discovery and began his career as a document dealer.)

The technique of sharing the discovery varied with other documents, particularly as Hofmann's reputation grew. He began to attribute discovery or provenance or both to various colleagues, including antiquities author Charles Hamilton with the Josiah Stowell letter, and Hofmann's sometimes-partner, Lyn Jacobs, in the case of the salamander letter and several other documents.

According to court testimony, Hofmann gave Jacobs's name as the provenance for the salamander letter when he asked Kenneth Rendell to authenticate it in November 1983. As *discoverer*, Jacobs took the letter to President Hinckley in January 1984. Both Hofmann and Jacobs had a part in the sales contract with Steven Christensen, though Hofmann received the lion's share of the profit. Jacobs claimed ownership again in 1985 when the Church released the text. However, in court he testified that he had first heard of the salamander letter during a call from Hofmann in late 1983. He also testified that Hofmann paid Jacobs because he had played a role in leading him to the source of the letter.

Documents other than the Anthon transcript also identified themselves. The Joseph Smith III blessing, Hofmann's next major find, had a note, "Joseph Smith III" penned on the reverse side. The David Whitmer and Martin Harris testimonial notes (sold, respectively, to the Church and collector Brent Ashworth) were, reportedly, found in the same envelope. The Oath of a Freeman, reportedly the first printed document in colonial America, won over several national experts, who were charmed by sixteenth-century handwriting on the reverse side, identifying it.

One of the best-identified documents is the earliest forgery that investigators attribute to Hofmann — the supposed text of a second anointing sealing, first seen in 1978 and sold in 1979. This 5 inch by 7 inch letter identifies itself by a stamp in one corner reading SALT LAKE TEMPLE and a half-erased note in the

other: "Destroy this copy." The stamp was not used in the temple. The note to destroy the blessing defies logic, since there is no contextual reason for writing the blessing and giving a copy to someone who should then destroy it. Nevertheless, these "clues" hint of a sinister authenticity. Hofmann sold this document to Simmonds, a non-Mormon, for \$60 a few months before he brought in the Anthon Transcript. (A young man allowed Sandra Tanner, in the Utah Lighthouse Ministry Bookstore, to photocopy the blessing in June 1978. Tanner now believes the man to have been Mark Hofmann.)

Many Hofmann documents entered the marketplace clothed in cultural myth. The Lucy Mack Smith letter, an obscure, unmailed cover letter (folded into a self-envelope) was hailed by the Church as "the most significant document outside the Book of Mormon" — a real-life Cinderella. The salamander letter and the Oath of a Freeman were reportedly plucked from heaps of documents by Mark Hofmann, soon to fool national experts like true Pygmalions. Also, rags-to-riches stories were common with Hofmann documents. Virtually every letter cost \$25, then sold for \$20,000, \$40,000, or — almost — more than \$1 million. Even when the documents Hofmann sold were purchased — not made — he apparently needed the myth. For example, the newspapers reported that Mark Hofmann had sold an Al Capone signature for \$5,000 that supposedly cost him \$25. In fact, Hofmann had bought the signature from Brent Ashworth for \$2,000 and added the story himself.

Many document deals were preceded by discussions during which Hofmann discovered an interest for a particular document he might create and ascertained specific information in order to assure its fit into a historical context.

One major investor told Hofmann he would like a first edition of the Book of Mormon. Within weeks, Hofmann brought him one, inscribed by the buyer's wife's third great-grandfather. Steven Christensen and his employee Brent Metcalfe actually made up a list of areas of Mormon history in which Christensen would buy any documents Hofmann might find, according to Metcalfe. When Brent Ashworth saw letters Joseph Smith wrote from Carthage Jail, housed in the RLDS archives, he asked Mark to watch for such an item. They frequently discussed the possibility of Mark finding another Carthage letter. When one finally appeared, from Joseph Smith to General Jonathan Dunham, Hofmann sold it to another collector. Ashworth was incensed. A few months before the bombings, Hofmann took a substantial loss on the convoluted repurchase and resale of that letter to Ashworth for \$90,000. Ashworth, probably Hofmann's hardest hit major financial victim, may take some comfort in knowing that it was the Dunham letter, and its dissimilarities to the RLDS Carthage letters written the same day, that raised forensic document analyst George Throckmorton's suspicions sufficiently to call the county attorney's office about six weeks after the bombings. The subsequent investigation then broke the stalemated circumstantial murder case.

Evidently, orders were placed more obliquely as well. When Hofmann asked a friend what he should look for if he was ever in the First Presidency's vault, the friend consulted with Jerald and Sandra Tanner of the Utah Light-

house Ministry and then suggested the Oliver Cowdery history. Brent Metcalfe, another friend of Hofmann's, asked him specifically if he had ever seen the history in the vault. Hofmann said no.

Sometime later, however, Hofmann told Metcalfe that the history did exist and the Church had it. In 1985, Hofmann described the history and a page or two of its contents in detail to Metcalfe and later to *Los Angeles Times* religion writer, John Dart. Metcalfe, whose order had been surprisingly well filled, then was interviewed by Dawn Tracy at the *Salt Lake Tribune*.

History-oriented Church leaders also "placed orders," asking Hofmann and other document finders if they had leads on the lost 116 pages. Evidence taken from Hofmann's home suggests that he was out in front in that search as well.

Preliminary discussions in which Hofmann described a document he had a lead on and/or the client expressed an interest in a particular item preceded many a sale. Individually these do not seem unusual. At the time, they seemed ordinary. Now they fit a pattern that mocks our credulity. My first example is of the physical preparation for a document sale; the second example involves psychological preparation for a document's acceptance.

Hofmann extensively researched some documents, though others were hastily prepared and sold. He created a provenance for some, including the Oath of a Freeman, which he expected to sell for more than \$1 million in the east. Using the pseudonym "Mike Harris" on 8 March 1985, Hofmann ordered a printing plate for a poem deliberately mistitled "The Oath of a Freeman" from Debouzek Engraving in Salt Lake City. On March 11, Mark Hofmann visited Argosy Bookstore in New York City. After browsing a bit, Hofmann bought a poem entitled "The Oath of a Freeman" and paid twenty-five dollars. His sales slip became a provenance.

On March 25, Mike Hansen — a name tied to Hofmann through telephone numbers, personal checks, items found in Hofmann's home, and a fingerprint — ordered a printing plate for the "Oath of a Freeman" with the text published by colonial printer Stephen Daye. That document and a second copy became crucial in Hofmann's escalating scams in 1985, which ultimately led to murder. Both Oath 1 and 2, demonstrably products of the printing negatives that investigators seized, were hotly defended by their investors.

Sometimes Hofmann paid attention to psychological preparation for a document. One example is the 1830 Martin Harris or salamander letter, which he read to friends in November 1983. One brainstorming session concerned not the literal sale of the letter, but the acceptance of the letter by the public, the Church, and the Mormon history community. The letter's controversial nature is due, in part, to the close relationship its author, Martin Harris, had with the prophet. Hofmann suggested that positive links be emphasized, such as the Anthon Transcript, which Harris had carried to Anthon; the E. B. Grandin contract to print the Book of Mormon, which Harris had signed; and a testimonial note, evidently dictated and signed by Harris. All these documents are Hofmann originals. The conversation also identified one element as crucial to the salamander letter's success, which eventually proved prophetic — the support of Mormon historians.

Like the historians he hired to research the salamander letter, Steven Christensen had plenty of reason to believe it was authentic when he donated the letter to the Church. At the time of his death, Steve Christensen was intent on closing the McLellin transaction. He had locked up a papyrus fragment purported to be Facsimile 2 in order to keep Hofmann from selling it separately. He pressured Hofmann relentlessly to come through with the collection and repay an overdue bank loan arranged by a general authority. He rearranged a pressured business schedule in order to keep in touch with Hofmann, Church leaders, and the designated buyer. Christensen indicated both his desire to save the Church embarrassment and his interest to add to the known history of the Church, as he had with the study of the salamander letter. Close friends say "he was living and breathing that document deal."

Kathleen Sheets knew virtually nothing about Mormon documents. And yet, on one wall of her spacious home she had hung an ancestral mission call signed by Brigham Young, alongside a portrait of Young, a ram's head, and some dried flowers. History was simply part of her culture.

Kathy Sheets, a lively mother and grandmother, a bishop's wife distinguished by wit and compassion, died as a decoy, to disguise through her husband's troubled investment firm the motive for Steven Christensen's murder.

The Hofmann documents and the stories that surround them reach deep into our culture. Thus, even as the context of the Hofmann scam broadens to the national market and national investors, collectors and victims, the epicenter will remain in Utah. We may look less naive as we gain company, but we will be no less involved. These documents and their faith-promoting tales and horror stories fit our conscious and unconscious assumptions. Gradually, reality was distorted until many within the Church, the press, the market, and the historical community worked to further one man's scheme.

This murder mystery that has captured our attention for two years, a paper chase extraordinaire, therefore includes all of us in varying ways and degrees. As a community we need to gain a sense of proportion; the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Commit Murder" precedes those forbidding lying, stealing, and bearing false witness. The denial that complicated the investigation has also been hurtful to some who lost loved ones. Healing follows the acknowledgement of pain, and the trauma of lost lives exceeds other damages.

Also, as these stories unravel and the documents are understood in a different light, there is the temptation to belittle those who "should have been" smarter, better trained, more inspired. In that way we may continue the damage that has been done personally, professionally, spiritually, or financially. Or as we undo the stories, we can search for our own reflections in their shiny surfaces. We can reach for understanding with an accuracy that recognizes courage and integrity, sees clearly human deception, cowardice, and rage, and accepts the vulnerability that makes all of us human.