



Al Hartman

THE WHITE SALAMANDER MURDERS

Mark Hoffman's Discoveries Had Shaken the Mormon Church. Then a Bomb Went Off. And Then Another.

Second of Two Parts

BY ROBERT A. JONES

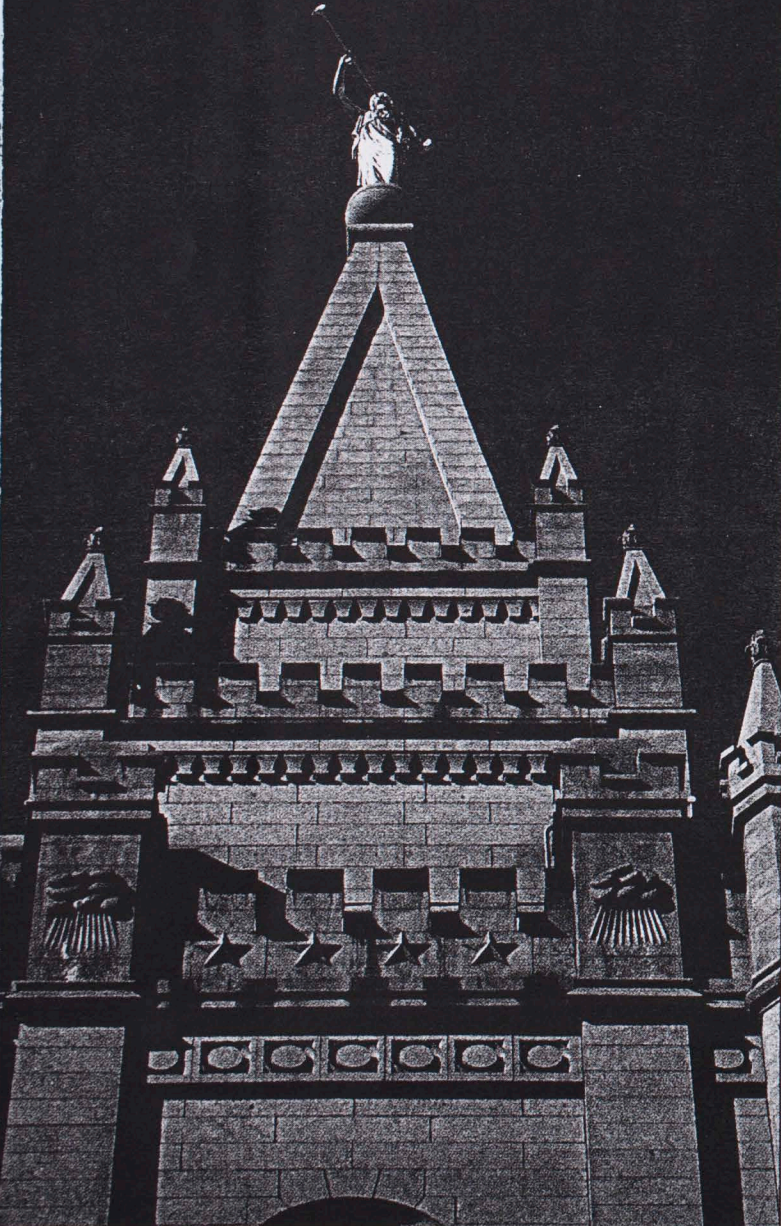
In Part I, the Mormon Church had been unsettled by the purported discovery of a series of 19th-century documents. Produced by a young collector named Mark Hofmann, they appeared to question official church history. In 1984, Hofmann had revealed the Salamander Letter, which gave a new, startling account of Prophet Joseph Smith's discovery of the gold plates. As Hofmann was promising to release yet another set of papers known as the McLellin Collection, three pipe bombs exploded in Salt Lake City. Two people were killed and Hofmann found himself in the hospital. And the McLellin Collection, if it had ever existed, had vanished.

THE MORMON TOWER in Salt Lake City commands the downtown skyline. From the top floors it is possible to see the spot where a pipe bomb blew Mark Hofmann out of his car on a warm afternoon in October, 1985. Looking the other direction it is possible to see the building where a similar bomb had killed Steven Christensen the previous day.

In the hours following the bombings, church leaders within the Mormon tower were forced to confront an unpleasant truth: They had been engaged in secret negotiations with both men just prior to the bombings. Money had changed hands; controversial church documents were to be transferred to the church archives. Now, two people were dead; another was in the hospital. And the documents, if they ever existed, had disappeared.

From the church headquarters, Elder Dallin Oaks contacted the

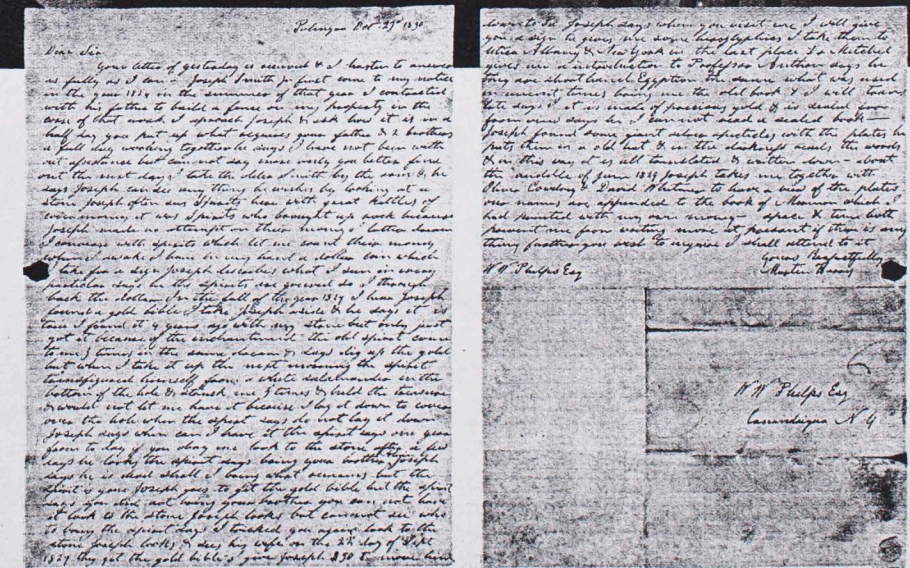
Mark Hofmann enters court for his arraignment on murder charges, with a lawyer and bailiff, top left; left, the Salt Lake City Temple.



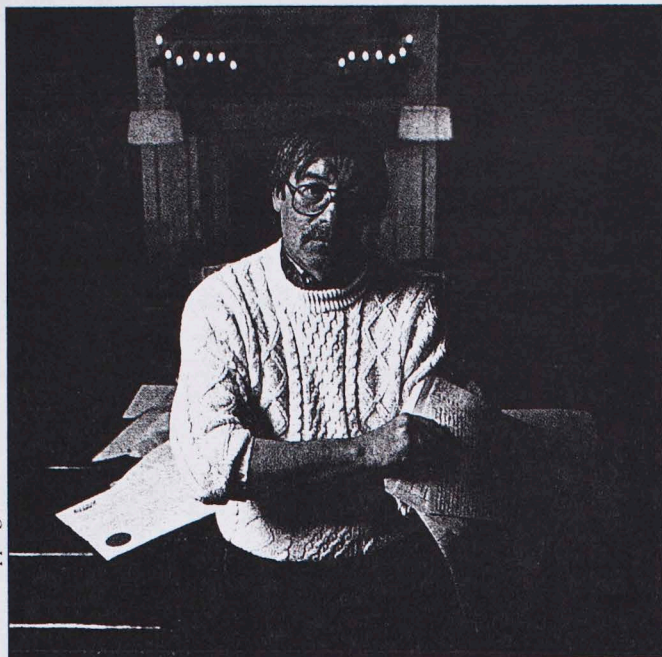
Anacleto Rapping



Anacleto Rapping



The document and the sleuths: George Throckmorton, above left, and William Flynn examined hundreds of documents, including the Salamander Letter, left, under the microscope. An unusual cracking pattern in the ink aroused their curiosity—and suspicion.



Archivist A. J. Simmonds: "New books . . . will change the perception of Joseph Smith. The faith itself will change."

police. Oaks is a member of the Council of the Twelve, the second highest ruling body in the church, and a former president of Brigham Young University. Oaks told them what he knew: that Christensen and Hofmann had been scheduled to deliver a set of historical papers known as the McLellin Collection on the day the bombs began to go off; that the church had arranged a \$185,000 bank loan to Hofmann to purchase the collection; that the loan had not been repaid. Everything else was a mystery.

Outside the church offices, Salt Lake City was unnerved. Normally this is not a city of mean streets; there is a prevailing sense of trust among Mormons, even on the sidewalks. The bombings changed that, at least temporarily. Several documents dealers left town, fearing for their lives. The area's bomb squads received hundreds of calls about suspicious packages, so many calls that several of the squads' sniffer dogs succumbed to exhaustion. A parcel delivery man was chased and beaten when he left a package wrapped in brown paper on a porch.

The Salt Lake City Police Department conducts its business in a concrete monolith just five blocks from the headquarters of the Mormon Church. Yet a great distance separated the two. Within the department there was none of the church's brooding apprehension, only a tense anticipation. The bombings were the most sensational crimes in recent memory; investigators from the FBI were flooding in. The department's detective bureau, which keeps a pet tarantula named Tina Turner in a terrarium on the reception desk, treated its mascot to an extra live cricket that day. This was a big one, maybe the best they would ever see.

Two detectives were placed in charge. Ken Farnsworth is tall, athletic, affable; his partner, Jim Bell, is quiet, driven. Within 24 hours they found themselves embroiled in a debate with other law enforcement agencies that would continue for months.

The friction started when Bell returned from a hospital interview with Hofmann. Bell had never heard of the McLellin Collection, had never heard of the growing crisis over Mormonism's historical origins. He had simply wanted to talk to Hofmann. As a victim.

Hofmann, in fact, was in remarkably good condition for a man who had just had a pipe bomb explode in his face. A kneecap was blown off, an eardrum was ruptured, and numerous small shrapnel wounds were inflicted. But he was conscious and willing to talk. He told Bell the bomb had gone off as he was heading to a meeting. He had opened the door of his Toyota sports car and a

package fell from the seat to the floorboard. When he reached for it, the package exploded.

But the Hofmann account turned out to be less than accurate. Back at the scene Bell was told by the bomb squad that the package could not have fallen to the floor. Analysis of the car's remains showed that the bomb had exploded on the front seat. The evidence also indicated that Hofmann must have been inside the car when the bomb went off, not climbing in.

A small discrepancy. But for Bell and the other city detectives, it was intriguing. Why would Hofmann lie about a detail like that? When the detectives learned about the missing McLellin Collection, they were more interested still. They had salvaged a charred sheet of ancient papyrus from the car; it appeared to have Egyptian hieroglyphics written on it. Was this part of the rumored collection? And in the car trunk the detectives found a section of galvanized pipe, very much like the pipe used in the bombs. At some point that afternoon, Hofmann ceased to be a victim in the detectives' minds, and became a suspect.

But the detectives' suspicions about Hofmann were met with disbelief by some investigators at the county attorney's office and the FBI. Many believed the city's detectives were foolishly mistaken. The real perpetrators, they were convinced, would be found elsewhere.

The main competing theory held that the killers were disgruntled investors. Hundreds of persons had lost money in the financially troubled firm managed by Steven Christensen and his partner, Gary Sheets. Supporters of this theory noted that two people died from bombings on the first day: Christensen and Gary Sheets' wife, Kathy. On the day of the bombings, Gary Sheets held up a computer list of all investors in his firm and told investigators, here are your suspects.

And then there was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was hard to imagine a church elder building pipe bombs, but Mormonism has always inspired some fanatics among its followers. Hofmann's historical revelations had produced turmoil and threatened to shake the church's understanding of its origins. Could an enraged follower have gone after Christensen and Hofmann in a misguided attempt to protect the church?

The debate over these theories threatened, at times, to turn the law enforcement agencies into divided camps. Several weeks into the case, the city detectives assembled in the Salt Lake County attorney's office to make a case against Hofmann. By this time there was more evidence: an eyewitness who would swear he saw Hofmann carrying a package into the office building where Christensen died; the discovery of a high school letter jacket in Hofmann's house that had been described by the eyewitness. It was all circumstantial, of course, and the county attorney refused to press charges on the evidence presented. At one point in the presentation a federal prosecutor stood up and said, "You've got the wrong man," and walked out of the room.

One evening shortly after that meeting, detective Bell wanted to think the case over. He wandered down to the department's indoor firing range, which had become a temporary evidence room. It was a spooky scene. The fire department, in hosing down Hofmann's car, had soaked every piece of paper inside. Now hundreds of documents and pieces of documents hung from clips, drying in the air. A hell of a lot of documents for one man, Bell thought. But then, Hofmann was a documents dealer; why shouldn't he have a lot of documents?

Bell had to face it; they didn't have the goods on Hofmann. There was an essential ingredient missing: The motive to commit murder. Why would a respected documents dealer want to kill his colleagues? Bell and the other detectives didn't know. And until they did, there was no case.

OFFICIALLY, NO ONE ASKED George Throckmorton about any of this. Throckmorton worked for the Utah attorney general's office as its documents expert. He wondered why the police seemed willing to accept the Hofmann documents at face value. Throckmorton is a devoted Mormon and was more than casually interested in the Salamander Letter. Every time he read that it had been "proven

genuine," he was amused. Throckmorton knew there was no such thing as *proof* of a document's authenticity.

In the world of document examination, there are many tests. Each is designed to detect a specific type of forgery. Infrared light, for example, can reveal that different inks have been used on a document; a forger often adds a rare signature, say, to a document to make it more valuable. If he uses an ink that is different from the original, infrared will catch him. But passing the infrared test does not mean a document is genuine. It only means that a single ink was used. And so it goes with document examination: Testing can prove forgery, but it cannot prove authenticity.

Since Throckmorton was the only qualified documents examiner in Utah, he expected a call from the county attorney's office or the Salt Lake police about the Hofmann case. It never came. Instead, he was contacted by a professor of church history at Brigham Young University. Dean Jesse was worried, a little; he was the man who had certified the handwriting on many of Hofmann's documents. Jesse suggested that he bring Throckmorton a copy of the Salamander Letter and the reports from the technical examination, just to check over.

The reports revealed what Throckmorton expected. The letter had not been dated; the experts had merely tested the two major components of the letter, the paper and the ink. The Salamander Letter had been written on 100% rag paper; the ink was an iron gallotannic composition. Both were materials used in the 19th Century. But that was all that the tests established. Hofmann could have written the Salamander Letter on a sheet of old paper with a formulation of iron gallotannic ink.

Throckmorton was suspicious. He visited the county attorney's office; he told them about the vulnerability of document testing, about old paper and old ink and how it didn't prove much. How there could still be forgery, how it could all add up to a motive for murder.

The county attorney's office was skeptical. After all, the Hofmann documents had been certified by a dozen experts from all over the country. Recently, the FBI had examined the Salamander Letter at its lab in Washington. It had come back clean. The investigators paused; they looked at Throckmorton. They still needed a motive, and they didn't have one.

What do you need to start, they asked.

A partner, Throckmorton said.

"I'm a Mormon," he explained. "No one would believe me, no matter what I found. We need a second expert. A non-Mormon expert."

That evening Throckmorton called William Flynn, an old friend and a document examiner for the state of Arizona. "What's your religion?" Throckmorton asked. Flynn said he was a non-practicing Catholic.

Perfect, thought Throckmorton. A Catholic who doesn't even go to church.

WITHIN DAYS the two men had set up a small document laboratory, complete with microscopes and testing machines, inside the church's archives. Next to their makeshift laboratory was one of the most guarded sanctums of the Mormon Church, the archival vault. It was the central repository of the church's past: The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon was kept there; the letters of Prophet Joseph Smith were kept there. And most of the Hofmann documents were kept there.

Negotiations with the church over access to the archives had been delicate, and the final arrangements were instructive: To begin work each morning, Throckmorton and Flynn had to pass through two outer doors before reaching the vault itself. Church officials had the only key to the first door; Flynn and Throckmorton the only key to the second. The vault's steel door could be opened with a combination known only to the church. Inside the vault, the Hofmann documents were kept in a locked briefcase, handcuffed to a pipe; those keys belonged to Flynn and Throckmorton. It was not exactly an arrangement built on trust.

The testing began with only seven documents. Throckmorton was studying the script of a Hofmann letter with a microscope when, almost casually, he remarked that the ink on the document was cracked. The cracking was invisible to the naked eye, but under the microscope it could be seen clearly; an unusual, alligator pattern in the letters.

Flynn took a look through the microscope. "I wonder what that means?"

On the table in front of them was a pile of Hofmann documents and another pile of general historical papers. Throckmorton suggested a game.

"Hand me a document and don't tell me which pile it comes from," he said to Flynn. "I'll tell you if it's a Hofmann or not."

Flynn handed him a paper; Throckmorton checked under the microscope and said, "Hofmann." He was right. With the next sheet: "Non-Hofmann." Right again. With the third: "Hofmann."

Wrong, Flynn said. It had come from the other pile. Throckmorton tried again, guessed Hofmann again, and was wrong again. He looked at Flynn and shrugged. "So much for theory No. 1," he said.

As the men packed up that day, Throckmorton was still intrigued. He asked the archives director for a favor. Would he check to see who had donated or sold all the non-Hofmann documents on the table to the church?

The report came back the next day: several of the sheets in the non-Hofmann pile were Hofmanns after all. Flynn and Throckmorton tried the test again; Throckmorton was right every time.

Then something remarkable happened. The men were examining a promissory note from the church's early days. It was a stand-

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ard item, not worth much, except that Joseph Smith had signed the note on the back. That signature increased its value 10 times. The men peered at the front side through the microscope. No cracking. They peered at the signature on the back. It was cracked.

They sent the promissory note to the archivist with a request to check on the source. It was a Hofmann. Flynn and Throckmorton smiled at each other and thought the same thing: Hofmann had forged the signature of Joseph Smith on the back of a genuine promissory note to increase its value. They had found a kind of Rosetta Stone.

MARK HOFMANN left the hospital in early November. He was confined to a wheelchair from the knee injury, but the doctors predicted he would walk again soon. Hofmann said nothing publicly and declined to speak with reporters.

He had been identified as the police department's chief suspect, but no murder charges had been filed. Many of Hofmann's clients and associates refused to believe he was the killer. His attorneys began to challenge the county attorneys to either file charges or admit they were wrong.

Some friends said they fully expected Hofmann to produce the McLellin Collection now that he was home from the hospital. He might have to wait for the appropriate legal opportunity, they said, but he would produce it. One of those was Lyn Jacobs, a theological historian who had helped Hofmann arrange the sale of the Salamander Letter. When asked about the McLellin Collection in an interview, Jacobs said, "I have no reason to doubt the collection exists as Mark has described it."

Warming to the subject, Jacobs continued, "Mark Hofmann is not a forger. I don't think he even knows how. I have never heard a negative statement concerning Mark's integrity from any archivist or professional. If he were a forger, how could he have gone so long without a single slip?"

IT WAS DURING THIS TIME that Gerry D'Elia would wake up with nightmares. D'Elia was a deputy county attorney; for two months he had been on the case. At night he would dream about Mark Hofmann, dream about the murders and then wake up suddenly, unable to sleep again. On those nights he hated the Mormons, hated their documents. He would stare into the darkness and swear he was leaving Utah.

D'Elia didn't leave. He went to the office instead. As often as not, there would be others there, and still others in the police department across the way. The bombing case had become a collective obsession; no one ever seemed to go home. Detectives would work for 20 hours straight and curl up to sleep under a table. Once Police Chief E. L. Willoughby walked into his of-

fice and found a half-dozen detectives snoozing on the floor. The chief offered to move out so the detectives could use his room as a dorm.

For D'Elia and many others, the obsession stemmed from wounded pride. "No one believed we were sharp; they thought we were just the local boys about to screw up a big case," he says. "Mainly, they believed we were wrong about Hofmann. So we wanted to be right."

All D'Elia's instincts told him Hofmann was the man. The other leads had turned

Friends fully expected Hofmann to produce the McLellin Collection once he was home from the hospital. 'I have never heard a negative statement concerning Mark's integrity from any archivist,' said one historian. 'If he were a forger, how could he have gone so long without a single slip?'

into blind alleys; the other suspects had faded.

But, by early December, D'Elia still needed to establish a connection between Hofmann and the pipe bombs; there wasn't enough evidence yet to convince a jury. Explosives experts had learned that the bombs had been filled with black powder and triggered by mercury switches. Several weeks earlier an investigator had walked into the police department and dropped the switches and connectors on a desk. Here are the bomb parts, he said; they were bought at Radio Shack. That was fine, D'Elia thought. But how could they prove that Hofmann bought those same parts at a Radio Shack?

They quickly discovered that Radio Shack uses an elaborate receipt system. Every customer, whether cash or charge, is asked to fill out a form that includes his name and address. D'Elia figured that Hofmann used an alias. During a search of Hofmann's house the detectives had found an envelope that contained the name "Mike Hansen." In the wild hope that Hofmann had used the same name at Radio Shack, the investigators began sifting through receipts.

There were tens of thousands of receipts. There were Radio Shacks all over the Salt Lake valley. Nothing was computerized; every receipt was a separate piece of paper. One by one, they started. Detectives would finish lunch early and run over to the closest Radio Shack to whip through a couple

thousand receipts. A squad of rookies at the police department was assigned to full-time Radio Shack duty. It was like counting the corn kernels in a grain silo.

Days passed; the search turned up nothing. Then one Saturday a rookie volunteered to re-scan several boxes of receipts; one of the detectives had a hunch about this batch. And there it was: a Mike Hansen receipt. For mercury switches.

The receipt did not prove Mike Hansen was Mark Hofmann. It did not prove that the mercury switches were put into a bomb. But a corner had been turned.

AT THE CHURCH archives, the discovery of the cracked ink had left Flynn and Throckmorton first excited, and then puzzled. Instinct told them that the cracking was a sign of forgery, but they weren't certain. What if it was a coincidence? Somehow they had to discover how the cracking got there, and what it meant.

Flynn had a theory, and he returned to Arizona to test it. If Hofmann was a forger, he must have aged his documents artificially. That would have required exposing the documents to certain chemicals. And Flynn guessed that the chemicals also cracked the ink. Exactly which techniques Hofmann would have used, Flynn couldn't guess.

Flynn was 40; he had pursued forgers for half his life. He loved the hunt. At times he has even felt affection for the best forgers because they made the hunt better. And never had there been anything like this; nothing so tricky, nothing where the stakes were so high. Flynn realized that if he and Throckmorton returned a finding of forgery, they would be implying that the other examiners had been played for fools. In the beginning, Flynn had hesitated to take the case, knowing the problems that might follow. But he hadn't hesitated long.

Back in Arizona, Flynn realized he had entered unexplored territory. Other experts knew very little about artificial aging. Finally he pulled a volume from his bookshelf that only a documents examiner would own and love: "Forty Centuries of Ink." Inside he found references to 19th-Century frauds and some clues about the art of making new documents appear old. It seemed that all techniques of artificial aging involved the rapid oxidation of ink, in this case the iron gallotannic ink widely used a century ago.

Flynn knew that many chemicals would oxidize the iron component in this ink, and he figured Hofmann would have used a product that was easily available. So he tried household ammonia; it worked. Then he tried sodium hydroxide; it worked even better. The fumes from sodium hydroxide turned the black ink to a dark, red, old-looking color within minutes. The iron in the ink was converting to rust, just as it would convert naturally over a period of decades. The aging that resulted from the chemicals was not so much artificial as it

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was vastly accelerated.

Then came the real test. Flynn slipped one of his newly aged sheets under the microscope to check for the characteristic cracking; he pulled the letters into focus. The surface he saw was completely smooth. The cracking wasn't there. Flynn waited, hoping the cracking would take time to develop. He looked again; it still wasn't there.

Flynn was unsettled; he had been so sure. He called Throckmorton in Salt Lake and the two men discussed what might have gone wrong. They decided the likeliest culprit was the formulation of ink. Maybe Hofmann's ink was different from theirs.

They needed a break, and they got it. Flynn recalled that a book had been seized at Hofmann's house during a search; it was "Great Forgers and Famous Fakes," by Charles Hamilton, a New York documents expert. Flynn got a copy in Phoenix and thumbed through the pages. In the back of the volume was the page he had been hoping to find: a formula for 19th-Century iron gallotannic ink. The formula contained several ingredients that Flynn had not used in his composition, but one in particular jumped off the page. Gum arabic.

Flynn called around town; no one had any. Finally he called his brother, a chemist who works for the Food and Drug Administration in Washington. The brother said gum arabic is a thickener, a food additive. He would ship some to Phoenix.

A week later Flynn sat at his desk and tried to duplicate the techniques Hofmann might have used. He mixed the gum arabic with a new batch of iron gallotannic ink in a glass bottle. He dipped a steel pen into the ink bottle and scratched a sentence across a sheet of century-old paper. The sentence was aged for half an hour with the highest-quality sodium hydroxide. Finally Flynn slipped the sheet under the microscope and focused. The letters were smooth at first, but then began to break in an odd, alligator pattern. They were cracking.

Flynn later figured it out. Gum arabic undergoes a radical change when it is exposed to an alkaline substance such as sodium hydroxide. That change causes the gum to transform from a thin fluid to a material that is thick and brittle. Something that would crack as it dried.

Flynn realized, with some irony, that Hofmann's craftsmanship had betrayed him. He had not made just any iron gallotannic ink; he had mixed a composition that was as close as possible to the ink used in the 19th Century. If Hofmann had ignored the gum arabic, the cracking would never have appeared.

Throckmorton and Flynn found other signs as they studied the Hofmann documents: Under ultraviolet light some documents showed a telltale feathering effect, a

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running of the ink that suggested that the sheets had been hung to dry. Other tests indicated that more than one ink had been used on some papers.

But after the cracking, they were sure Flynn and Throckmorton had found a master forger; so good that a half dozen of the best experts in the country had been fooled. They had also found a motive for murder.

IN SALT LAKE, THE PILE of Hofmann documents kept growing at police headquarters. Ken Farnsworth, the detective in charge of the document investigation, had begun with one set of documents—the Egyptian papyri that were supposedly part of the McLellin Collection. By the time the two documents examiners discovered the forgeries, Farnsworth and the other investigators had collected a small universe of documents from Hofmann's clients. There were Mormon letters, old Bibles, hymn books, Mormon currency, 19th-Century contracts, Books of Mormon in English, Books of Mormon in foreign languages, frontier emigrant guides and ecclesiastical blessings.

Nor was the collection limited to Mormon history. The Oath of a Freeman, which Hofmann had offered to the Library of Congress for \$1.5 million, remained in New York with Hofmann's agents. Other Hofmann clients produced a second copy of the oath, along with promissory notes signed by frontier scout Jim Bridger, a letter by Betsy Ross, a photograph of Al Capone with his signature, an autographed copy of Jack London's "Call of the Wild." In the 10 months before the bombings, the detectives calculated that Hofmann consummated deals worth \$944,000.

One by one, Flynn and Throckmorton tested the documents. They had a standard now. They looked for the cracking; they looked for the feathering effect around words. Over a two-month period the men examined more than 600 documents, both Hofmanns and non-Hofmanns.

They tested the Anthon Transcript that Hofmann had brought to the archivist at Utah State University with the pages stuck together. It was a forgery.

They tested the Lucy Mack Smith letter, the earliest known Mormon document, which Hofmann had sold to Brent Ashworth, thereby making Ashworth a famous Mormon. It was a forgery.

They tested the Joseph Smith letter discussing the Prophet's money-digging activities. It was a forgery.

And then they tested the Salamander Letter. It was a forgery.

Every important document that Hofmann had ever produced, the faith-promoting documents and the church-threatening documents, they were all forgeries.

The only remaining question involved

the first Oath of a Freeman. Hofmann's New York agents successfully resisted a subpoena ordering them to deliver the oath for examination. The mystery of the second oath was solved, however. It had been printed from an engraved plate that Hofmann had ordered from a plate-making company. In Hofmann's basement detectives found a photographic negative that had been used to produce the engraved plate. Most likely, the second oath was printed in Hofmann's basement.

The McLellin Collection remained a phantom. A Salt Lake Tribune reporter located the Texas family that owned many of William McLellin's papers. The reporter was allowed to read the collection; it contained none of the items described by Hofmann. The family patriarch said he had no intention of selling the collection and had never discussed its sale to Mark Hofmann. He had never heard of Mark Hofmann.

FARNSWORTH CAME TO appreciate some of the ironies in the case. He now understood, for example, that most of Hofmann's forgeries were not single events. The environment for a forgery was often prepared in advance, sometimes years in advance. When the handwriting of the Salamander Letter was being examined, authenticators compared it to one of the few examples of writing by the author, Martin Harris. The sample had come from the Mormon church archives. What the authenticators did not know was the source of the sample. It also had come from Mark Hofmann, who had traded the sample to the church years previously. The authenticators, without their knowledge, were certifying a Mark Hofmann forgery by comparing it to another Mark Hofmann forgery.

In Farnsworth's mind, the incredible number of forgeries answered many questions. It explained the terrible pressures squeezing Hofmann in the final weeks before the bombings. The collector had simply let the fraud get away from him; he had promised documents—the McLellin Collection, mainly—that he could not fake or forge. The desperate dealings in the last weeks were an attempt to avoid a final accounting that would uncover the deception. The man who pressed him the hardest, Steven Christensen, was the first to die. Farnsworth believed that the killing of Kathy Sheets was a desperate and cold-blooded attempt to divert the investigation.

Still, there were unanswered questions. Why did Hofmann promise anyone a huge set of papers such as the McLellin Collection, a collection too large to be forged without enormous effort? And who was the intended victim of the bomb that exploded in Hofmann's car? Farnsworth was not sure. Perhaps it exploded by accident as Hofmann set the triggering device. Or perhaps it was intended to destroy Hofmann's car

after Hofmann walked away. There were many speculations; only Hofmann knew the answers.

IN FEBRUARY, 1986, Hofmann was charged with the murders of Steven Christensen and Kathy Sheets, and with 28 counts of fraud. Two months later, at a lengthy preliminary hearing, the state presented its case against the collector. Eyewitnesses placed Hofmann in the building where Christensen had died; bomb parts bought by "Mike Hansen" were shown, in fact, to have been bought by Mark Hofmann; he was tied to forgery after forgery. The defense offered no witnesses.

As the date for Hofmann's trial approached, his defense attorneys began to discuss a possible plea bargain; a guilty plea would allow him to avoid a possible death penalty. But a last, odd twist appeared. Hofmann's father, a native Utahan and lifelong Mormon, told his son that he should reconsider the plea bargain.

The father's argument was founded on the Mormon tenet known as blood atonement, which holds that some crimes can only be repaid with the blood of the sinner. Hofmann's father was worried that his son, in gaining a reduction in sentence, might condemn himself to eternal torture.

Things came to a standstill. Then a deputy county attorney discovered that the Mormon Church had renounced blood atonement in the 1960s. A citation of the new policy was photocopied and passed to the elder Hofmann through the defense attorneys. The plea bargain went forward.

In January of this year, Hofmann walked into a Salt Lake County courtroom and pleaded guilty to the second-degree murders of Christensen and Sheets. He admitted that the Salamander Letter was a forgery and that the attempted sale of the McLellin Collection was a deception. The judge sentenced Hofmann to four concurrent terms of five years to life in the state penitentiary and said he would recommend that Hofmann spend the rest of his life behind bars.

As part of his plea bargain, Hofmann agreed to an unusual arrangement with the prosecutors. He promised to answer all questions surrounding the events of the past five years. Chief among those questions are the target of the third bomb and the strategy behind the McLellin Collection. The debriefing has been greeted with some skepticism, the potential honesty of the answers doubted. The process is ongoing and prosecutors say the debriefing material will be released soon.

SINCE THE ORIGINAL disclosures about the church's involvement with Mark Hofmann, Mormon officials have had little to say about the affair. They have declined all interviews and made no public statements except for their testimony at the

preliminary hearing. Hugh Pincock, the church elder who arranged the \$185,000 bank loan to Hofmann, repaid the loan himself. The public relations extravaganzas surrounding faith-promoting documents have disappeared.

In the past few months the church has installed a tighter security system in its archives and placed new restrictions on their use. To gain access to the archives, scholars must now sign forms saying they will submit their manuscripts to the church for review before publication.

Yet the re-examination of Joseph Smith and the origins of the church continues in Utah universities, even though the Hofmann documents that inspired the effort have been repudiated. One scholar will soon publish a book describing the American folklore and rites of magic that accompanied the church's early days. Michael Quinn, the author, says the book was begun because of questions raised by the Salamander Letter. However, he says, the Salamander Letter was simply the catalyst, not the foundation of the book.

Many of those closely involved in the Hofmann affair believe the reshaping of Mormon history was Hofmann's true purpose, whether consciously formulated or not. They note that the controversial documents placed Hofmann in a position of high visibility and great risk; forging rare but innocuous documents would have been safer and more lucrative. Yet Hofmann repeatedly produced forgeries that touched the most sensitive parts of the church's past. And there are indications that Hofmann had no intention of stopping; in Hofmann's house detectives found evidence that the 116 Lost Pages of the Book of Mormon were being prepared.

Thus far, there is little evidence that the turmoil has produced an erosion of Mormon faith. But some scholars believe the impact cannot be measured in the short-term.

"You're going to see new books come along, and slowly they will change the perception of Joseph Smith," says A. J. Simmonds, the archivist at Utah State University. "I think you are going to see a liberalization, a Methodization of the Mormon church, and the faith itself will change. Mark Hofmann did not produce that change, of course. The Hofmann events served as a trigger for other forces that were out there already, waiting."

At police headquarters, the room that once was stacked high with Hofmann documents has been cleared out. There are few mementos of the months when no one went home. But after Hofmann was imprisoned, some of the investigators received letters from Bill Flynn. Each letter was written on antiquated paper and scratched in the handwriting of a century ago. Each expressed high gratitude for the investigator's splendid work in capturing the wily Mark Hofmann.

The letters were signed, "Joseph Smith." The signatures looked very real; it would have taken an expert to tell the difference. □

Got those vacation blues.



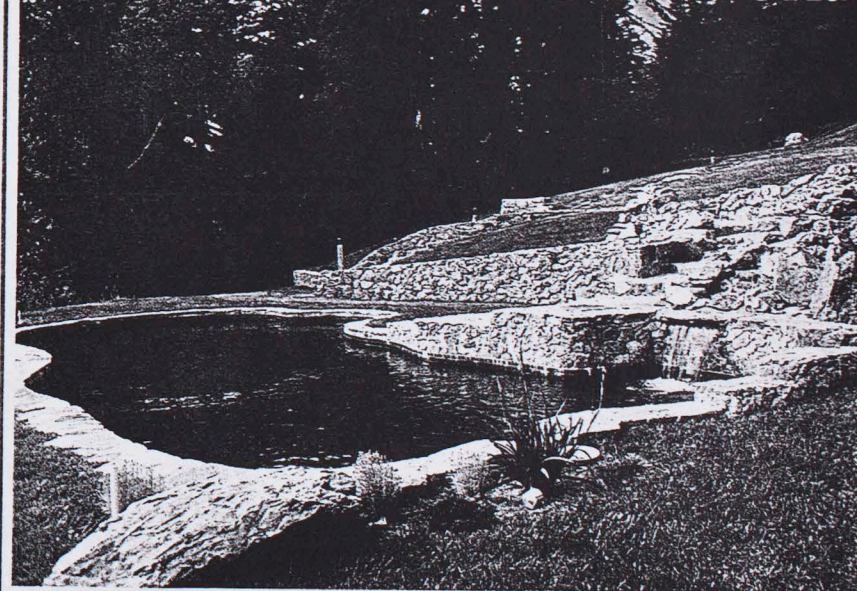
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MORMONS: History Challenged Over Gold Plates 'covery

Continued from Page 3

indeed owns the rumored Joseph Smith letter. On the heels of those detailed disclosures, reports of the Cowdery history began to surface in the Utah news media.

Church spokesman Jerry Cahill acknowledged that Joseph Fielding Smith, a church apostle who was church president from 1970 to 1972, wrote 60 years ago, "We have on file in the Historian's Office the records written in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery, the first historian or recorder of the Church."

Cahill said, "I presume (they are) in the possession of the First Presidency" because they are not in the history department archives. He added that he would not ask the First Presidency if it has the purported history, saying he does not want to bother that office with questions about rumored or reported documents. A First Presidency staff member had no comment.

Church historians say that Cowdery, a schoolteacher a year older than Joseph Smith, was the official historian until 1831. Joseph Fielding Smith noted once that Cowdery's successor, John Whitmer, "never was as successful in writing items of history and doctrine as was Oliver Cowdery."

It is unknown what effect a study of the Cowdery history would have on the Mormon faithful and potential converts, but the reactions to the Harris and Smith letters have been remarkably mild.

Times described the Cowdery history as a book bound partly in leather, with marbled cardboard covers measuring about 8 inches by 10 inches in width and height and between half an inch and three-quarters of an inch thick. The pages are lined, he said.

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.

"I don't remember the exact wording, but it said that Alvin located the buried gold with his seer stone," he said. "I remember clearly that it was not a private venture. Alvin had other people with him, including Joseph."

"There was no mention of a dream beforehand," he said. The salamander appeared on three occasions, once to Alvin and twice to Joseph, he added.

Claim Questioned

The source said he does not think that the Cowdery history, if studied and openly discussed, would cause the leaders of the Mormon Church to rewrite the official history.

"There is a propensity to keep things the way they are. Dutiful Mormons would say that after Alvin died, the angel came to Joseph and told him what to do," he speculated.

Church spokesman Cahill noted that the claim about the Cowdery history, made by a person unwill-

ing to be identified publicly, is not supported by another witness or photographs of the pages in question. "We can't ignore Joseph Smith's first-hand accounts," he said.

At the same time, the church leadership's unwillingness to speak further on the issue is being viewed by some as harmful to its public relations. "The church's silence damages its credibility," said George Smith of San Francisco, owner of the Mormon-oriented Signature Books publishing house.

Indeed, the church got caught with a credibility problem earlier, when it tried to deny that the earliest known letter written by Joseph Smith was in its possession.

In late April, Cahill told the Salt Lake City Tribune that the First Presidency did not own the 1825 document. Cahill later said, however, that Gordon Hinckley, the second counselor to President Spencer W. Kimball, had informed him that they did have the letter, which was released publicly May 10. A New York City autograph collector later said that the church had owned the letter since 1983.

More importantly, though, it is the credibility of the church in its earliest stages that is being questioned.

Other than Smith and his family, Harris, Cowdery and John Whitmer were the primary witnesses to the founding of the church.

They signed a joint statement affixed to the Book of Mormon that "an angel of God came down from

heaven" and laid before their eyes the engraved plates that Smith said he translated. Smith claimed that the plates were later taken back by the angel.

'A Bad Word to Use'

"Conspiracy may be a bad word to use," said the source who claims to have seen the Cowdery book, "but there must have been some sort of agreement that Joseph is the new seer now that Alvin is gone. Certainly the family and Oliver Cowdery knew. I can't imagine that any more knew, because it's an important aspect of the founding of the Church and it hasn't come down in other histories that we know of."

Historian Richard L. Bushman of the University of Delaware, a Mormon, said in a telephone interview that he "would not say it's impossible" that the alleged Cowdery story is true. If so, "Alvin's role does come as a complete surprise. That's the only indication that Alvin even took part in the events," said Bushman, whose book, "Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism," was published last year.

On the other hand, Mormon historian Ronald Walker of Salt Lake City said in an interview, "If we found out that Alvin is involved, it would not be surprising. There is evidence that (Smith family members) were up on Hill Cumorah digging before 1823."

Walker has shown that the Smith family was among many

Americans who had engaged in a "money-digging" craze during the early 19th Century. "I'm not sure the pieces fit together," Walker said. "What we need is to get the church to release it, if the church has it."

Both historians agreed that the alleged Cowdery account gains some plausibility in the light of two items: The curious account about Alvin in the 1830 Harris letter and the emphasis on the family's role in acquiring the golden plates in a history written by Lucy Smith, the mother of Joseph, Alvin and seven other children.

Told to Bring Brother

Harris, writing to a newspaper publisher about what Joseph Smith had told him three years before, said the spirit refused to let Joseph have the gold plates in 1823 and told Joseph to come back in a year. At a time not clear from Harris' text, Joseph is told to bring his brother, Alvin, but Joseph protests that he is dead and asks if he should bring his remains. The spirit does not answer.

Upon returning to the site, Harris said, "Joseph goes to get the gold Bible, but the spirit says, 'You did not bring your brother—you cannot have it—look to the stone.' Joseph looks but cannot see who to bring. The spirit says, 'I tricked you again—look to the stone.' Joseph looks & sees his wife." Joseph married early in 1827, Harris wrote, "and on the 22nd day of Sept. 1827 they get the gold Bible."

book "Mormonism, the New Religious Tradition" by Jan Shipps also possibility that the quest for gold plates was not just a family enterprise but a family effort based her conclusion on a history by Lucy Smith which had been criticized by later church lead-

Credentials

The prophet was Joseph Smith, it might be coincidental; it might be Alvin or Hyrum (another) just as well, for the concern with presenting credentials, both religious and of the family," wrote the University of Indiana mother's preliminary report, Shipps wrote, "conference is made to the living been in the possession of the Smiths, rather than to having had them."

also quotes Lucy Smith as Alvin manifested, if such the case, greater zeal and in regard to the Record been shown to Joseph, of the rest of the family."

last words to Joseph's death, according to the included: "Do everything in your power to obtain the Be faithful in receiving on, and in keeping every ment that is given to you. Ther Alvin must leave you, ember the example which t for you."

been re...
'Why the Fuss?'

Some Mormons have asked how much difference exists—in the final analysis—between a salamander and an angel and between magic and religion. Others have said the basic truths of the faith are unaffected.
The Arizona-based Latter-day Sentinel, which is also circulated in Southern California, recently ran a story with the headline, "So Why the Fuss Over the 'White Salamander' Letter?" It noted efforts to equate a white salamander with an angelic figure or an ancient warrior, which Mormonism was, according to the Book of Mormon.

Susan Turley, an editor at the newspaper, said, "Like most Mormons I know in the Phoenix area, my testimony of the church is not based on history but (on) what my own spiritual experiences and study of church doctrine have done for me."

Robert Rees, assistant dean of UCLA's College of Fine Arts, said the Book of Mormon has to have had divine origins. Otherwise, he said, it is not plausible that one man could write the 275,000-word book with its spiritual content and use of complicated literary forms.

Rees, a former editor of the independent and sometimes controversial Mormon journal Dialogue, said his friends in the church tend to be "open-minded" people who might challenge church teachings based on new information. However, he said, only a few are "mildly disturbed," at most.

'It Will Be Devastating'

Others think that the church is in for some rough times if the purported Cowdery history is eventually confirmed.

"The Harris letter was bad enough, but if we find the Cowdery history really talks about Alvin discovering the plates and the salamander first, it will be devastating," said Sandra Tanner of Salt Lake City, who along with her husband, Gerald, publishes critiques of Mormon history and doctrine.

The source interviewed by The

Church Alleged to Possess 150-Year-Old Evidence

Mormon Origins Challenged Anew Over Purported History

By JOHN DART, *Times Religion Writer*

SALT LAKE CITY—For the last year, the 5.5-million-member Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had to deal with a series of historical findings that have challenged the very origins of Mormonism.

So far the disclosures, which give a mundane and folk magic cast to the religious story of how church founder Joseph Smith located the gold plates that led to the Book of Mormon, seem to have perturbed few of the Mormon faithful.

They have forced church officials to admit to the existence of the documents, however, and to rationalize why Smith's followers would present a different picture of the church's birth than exists in the official histories.

Brother Alvin's Role

Now an allegation is being made that the church possesses a 150-year-old handwritten history that claims that it was the church prophet's older brother, Alvin, who actually found the golden plates.

Joseph Smith, who organized the church in 1830, lamented his brother's sudden illness and death in November, 1823, but does not credit the oldest son in the Smith family with any role in the discovery of the plates. Church accounts say that Joseph Smith alone found the plates in September, 1823.

Church officials here have been vague in their response to questions about whether they have the history, said to be written by Oliver Cowdery, a colleague of Joseph Smith and his scribe for most of the Book of Mormon. A highly reliable source told *The Times* in an interview here, however, that he has viewed it in the church's headquarters.

The source, who insisted on anonymity in order to preserve his standing in the church, said the Cowdery history and the role it gives Alvin Smith lend further credibility to the documents disclosed earlier, which portray Joseph Smith's involvement in occult methods to find hidden treasures without any references to religious events so familiar to present-day Mormons.

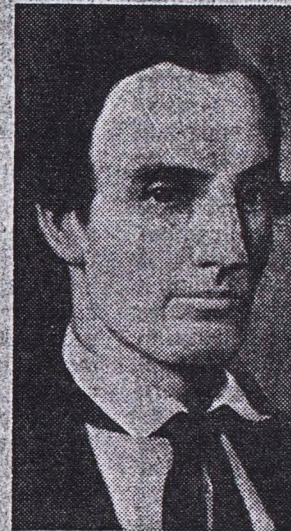
Joseph Smith's account, written in the 1830s, begins his story with a vision he said he had in 1820, at age 14, in which God, in the persons of the Father and the Son, told him that existing churches were wrong. An angel he called Moroni, son of an ancient figure named Mormon, told Smith in dreams on the night of Sept. 21, 1823, of an ancient record on golden plates to be found on a hill near his home in Palmyra, N.Y. Smith said that he went alone to the hill before dawn the next morning but that Moroni denied him immediate possession of the plates.

Smith said he returned annually on Sept. 22, the autumnal equinox, but was not permitted to obtain

the buried treasure until 1827. From that point, after some difficulties, he said, he "translated" the plates into the Book of Mormon, a supposed history of ancient civilizations in the Americas which, for church members, supplements the Bible as authoritative Scripture.

Throughout its history, the Mormon Church has had to deal with charges that the Book of Mormon is a figment of Smith's imagination and that Smith was just a treasure seeker. In earlier days, before most church members made their way to Utah, opposition to the teachings of the church and its advocacy of polygamy often led to violence against Mormons. Smith was a victim of a lynch mob in Carthage, Ill., in 1844.

The church has countered the criticism of Smith



Oliver Cowdery



Joseph Smith

by noting that charges of magic in Mormonism's beginnings were written by unfriendly outsiders.

In the spring of 1984, reports began to circulate that a Mormon bishop had purchased a letter written by Martin Harris, Mormonism's first convert, that said a white salamander—a figure long used in myth and magic—had transformed itself into an old spirit to guard the plates. No mention was made of an angel. Another letter by Joseph Smith was rumored to exist in which he advised a man that

"some clever spirit" would be protecting any buried riches being sought.

In recent weeks, the Harris letter was verified as authentic, and the church acknowledged that it

Please see **MORMONS**, Page 24

Mormon Church official pays suspected bomber's bank loan

United Press International

SALT LAKE CITY — A Mormon Church official yesterday paid off a bank loan obtained by suspected booby-trap bomber Mark Hofmann, who allegedly wanted to use the money to buy a mysterious collection of 19th Century Mormon documents.

Hugh Pinnock said he paid off the remainder of the loan because the bank apparently depended on his assurances before giving the money to Hofmann, who is suspected of killing two people before, police believe, being critically injured by one of his own bombs.

"Although I am not legally obligated to the bank, I feel morally and ethically responsible to make certain the bank does not suffer any loss,"

said Pinnock, who also is a director of First Interstate Bank.

Hofmann had met with Pinnock and at least two other church officials last June. In those meetings, Hofmann said he could obtain a collection called the M'Lellin Papers for \$185,000, church leaders said.

Officials said the church would not buy the documents of the early Mormon apostle who was later excommunicated. They also refused to finance the deal, but Pinnock sent Hofmann to First Interstate Bank where he obtained the loan.

"I was not a party to the loan. But, as a result of my referral, the bank made the loan to Mr. Hofmann," Pinnock said. "I am convinced the bank would not have made the loan to Mr.

Hofmann were it not for my assurance that it was a safe loan."

He said the repayment came from his "personal resources. No funds or other resources of the church have been or will be used, either directly or indirectly."

Pinnock declined to say how much he paid to the bank, but two days earlier it was reported Hofmann's payments on interest and the loan principal totaled \$20,000.

In a rare news conference Wednesday, Pinnock and apostles Gordon Hinckley and Dallin Oaks said there was nothing sinister about the church's dealings with Hofmann and that he had given historic documents to the church since about 1980.

Hofmann was critically injured

Oct. 16 by a bomb that police said may have detonated accidentally in his car and may have been meant for another victim.

Steven Christensen, 31, a Mormon bishop, and Kathleen Sheets, 50, the wife of Christensen's ex-partner in

an investment brokerage, died in separate blasts Oct. 15.

Hofmann remained hospitalized in satisfactory condition.

Christensen was involved with Hofmann in locating and selling historic Mormon documents. Christen-

sen and J. Gary Sheets, husband of the other victim, financed research aimed at authenticating Hofmann's discoveries.

M'Lellin was once a close friend of Mormon Church founder Joseph Smith Jr.

Mormon Documents Dealer Never Got Payment

Blasts Suspect Believed Out for Revenge

From Times Wire Services

SALT LAKE CITY (UPI)—The chief suspect in bombings that killed one Mormon bishop (pastor) and the wife of another may have acted because he was never paid \$40,000 for his sale of a controversial 1830 Mormon Church letter, authorities said Thursday.

The only link between Mark Hofmann, a self-employed Mormon documents dealer, and the two people killed by bomb blasts three hours apart on Tuesday was the so-called "White Salamander Letter," authorities said.

Hofmann, 30, was critically hurt in an explosion while getting into his parked car on a downtown street Wednesday. The blast appeared to have been accidental and caused by the same type of bomb that killed the others, officials said.

Authorities believe Hofmann was planning to kill at least three other unidentified victims.

Valuable Mormon documents were found in the trunk of his gutted car, Police Chief Bud Wiloughby said.

Police theorized that Hofmann may have been motivated by revenge toward fellow traffickers in

books and papers dealing with the 19th-Century origins of the Mormon Church.

"We're talking probably a monetary problem here," said Jerry Miller, an agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Salt Lake County Sheriff Peter Hayward also suggested forgery may be involved in the case.

"We're also looking at the possibility of forged documents—this Joseph Smith document was one of them," he said.

Researchers believed the letter to be authentic.

Hofmann underwent eight hours

Truck Hits Car, Bursts Into Flames; One Injured

PITTSBURGH (AP)—A tractor-trailer truck loaded with canned corn slammed into a car and exploded in flames inside a busy freeway tunnel Thursday, authorities said. One person was slightly injured. The fire severely damaged the tunnel, buckling supports and burning electrical circuits.

of surgery at a hospital and was listed in critical condition after the blast. Officials planned to file federal weapons charges against him with additional charges possible.

Miller said investigators were looking into the possibility Hofmann was not paid the \$40,000 he reportedly negotiated in his 1984 sale of the historic letter to Steven Christensen, 31, a businessman and Mormon bishop.

Christensen was killed Tuesday in the explosion of a bomb in his sixth-floor downtown office.

Hours later, Kathleen Sheets, the wife of Christensen's former business partner who had helped finance research into the 19th Century letter, was killed in a similar blast outside her suburban home. Her husband, Gary Sheets, also a Mormon bishop, was believed to have been the intended victim of the explosive-rigged parcel.

The "White Salamander Letter," written by Martin Harris, an early associate of Mormon Church founder Joseph Smith Jr., ties Smith to folk magic and treasure digging.

It describes Smith's confronta-



Associated Press

Salt Lake City investigators examine wreckage of car in which bombing suspect was injured.

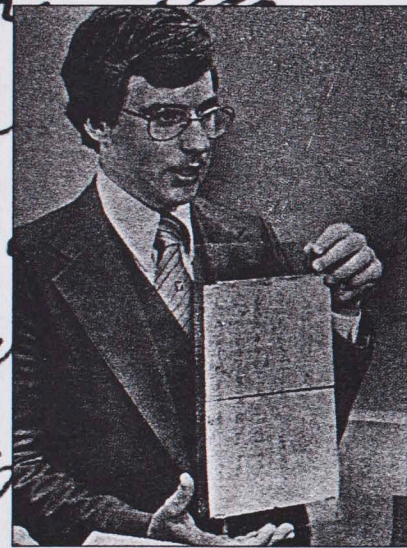
tion with a white salamander that changed into a spirit that led him to a gold Bible. The document also said Smith believed he had the ability to see visions in a stone and

saw spirits with great kettles of money.

Church critics contend the letter casts doubt on the official Mormon portrait of Smith as a latter-day

religious prophet who was led by an angel to a book of golden plates that he translated into the Book of Mormon, the main scriptures on which the church is based.

THE WHITE SALAMANDER MURDERS



When Mark Hofmann Brought a 'Lost' Mormon Document to Church Elders in 1980, He Was Embraced as a Hero. But His Subsequent Finds Led to One of the Most Troubling Episodes in Mormon History—a Saga of Greed, Forgery, Deceit and Death.

First of Two Parts.

BY ROBERT A. JONES

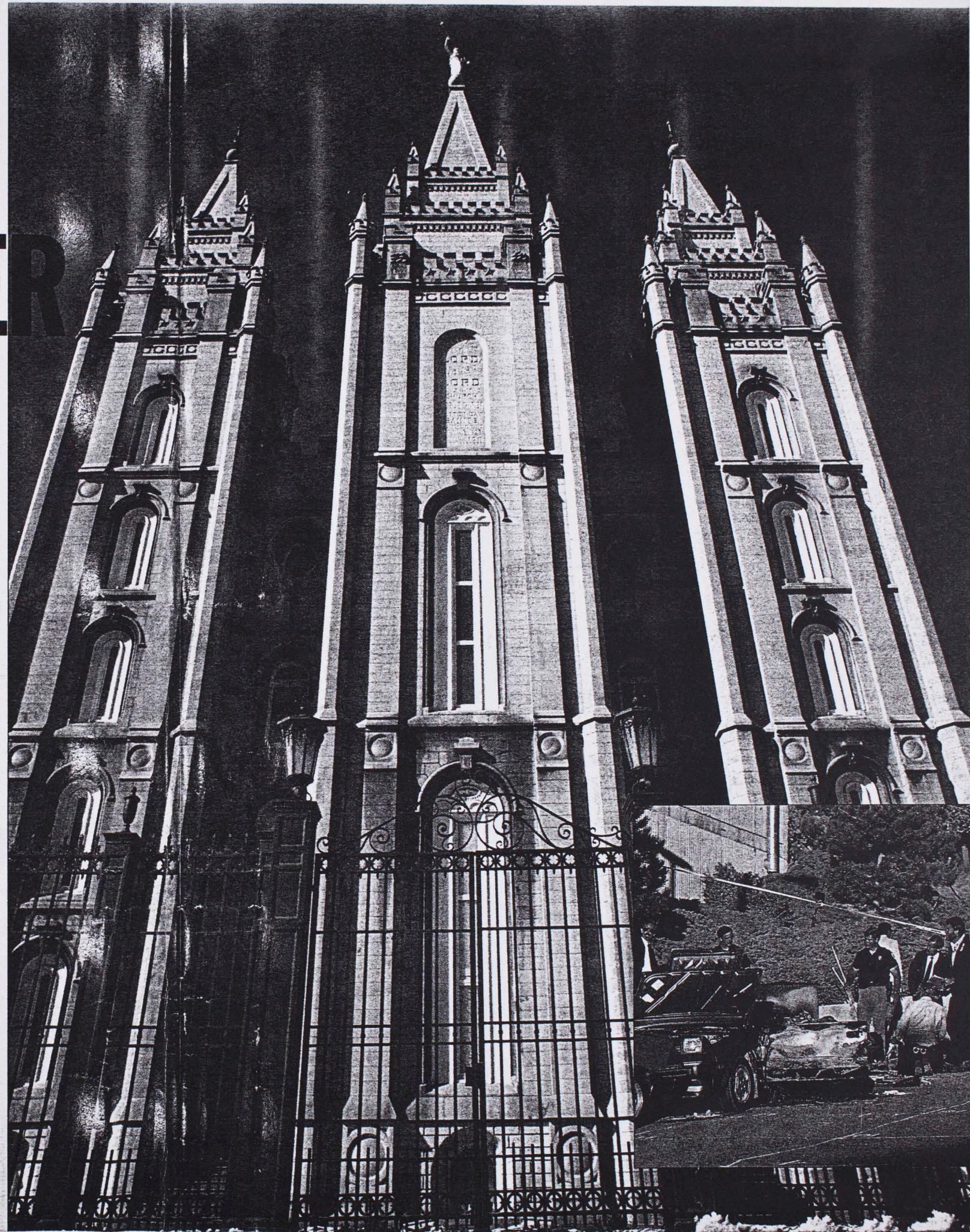
A. J. Simmonds remembers the young man coming to his office. It was a warm April in 1980, what is known in Mormon country as an open spring, when a returned Mormon missionary marched through the doors of the archives at Utah State University. The archives are a peaceful place, lit by a huge picture window with a view of the city of Logan below. Simmonds looked up at the young man; he noticed a worn Bible tucked under his arm.

Mark Hofmann sat down in Simmonds' cramped cubicle and produced the old Bible; then he produced something else. It was a sheet of yellowed, antique paper, folded twice and stuck together along the open edge with a tarlike glue. The archivist took the sheet and ran his fingers along the glue. It felt like old rubber bands.

"What do you want?" Simmonds asked.

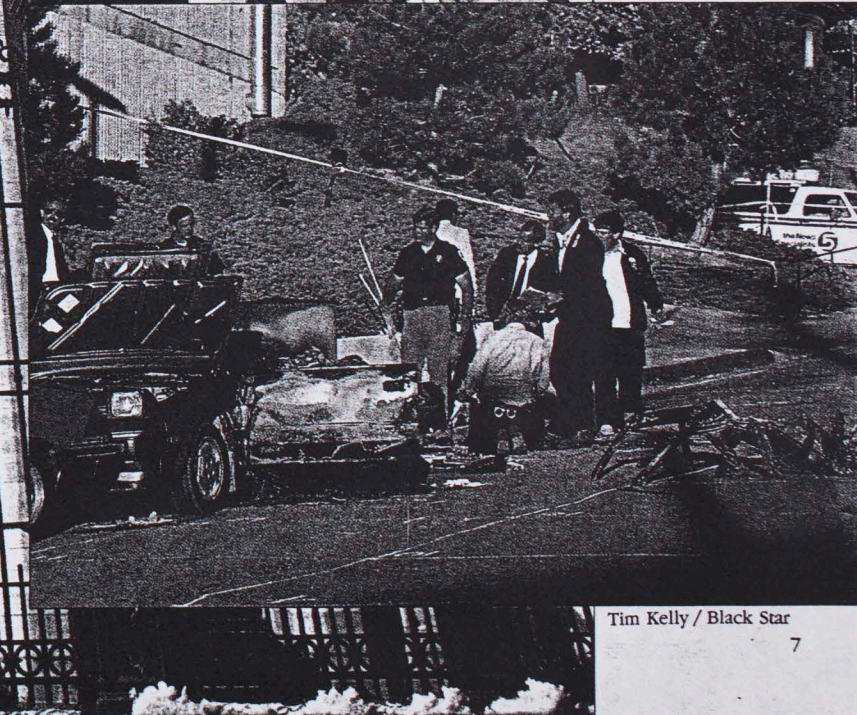
"The sheet won't unfold," Hofmann said. He had found the packet stuck between two pages of the Bible. Since the Bible was very old, he thought the sheet might contain interesting material. But there was this problem with the glue. He was afraid he would

Extraordinary finds: Mark Hofmann, inset, presents what he claimed was the Anthon Transcript, 1980; left, text from the Salamander Letter, which surfaced in 1983.



Anacleto Rapping

Temple Square, Salt Lake City: At left, the Temple, the spiritual center of the Mormon empire; below, police examine the remains of Mark Hofmann's car after the 1985 bombing.



Tim Kelly / Black Star

destroy the paper if he pulled it apart.

Hofmann was no stranger to Simmonds. During his years on the Logan campus, the undergraduate had become a regular in the archives. He would bend over the reading table for hours as he pored through reproductions of early Mormon currency. Not that he was an academic, really. Academics went home at night and read the *Journal of Western American History*. Simmonds suspected that Hofmann went home and read *True West* magazine.

But the document Simmonds held in his hand was not a piece of Mormon currency. On one surface there was a clearly discernible signature of Joseph Smith. Was it *the* Joseph Smith, prophet of the Mormon Church? Simmonds didn't know, but he was intrigued.

Together the two men tried to separate the pages with Toluene, a solvent. Nothing. Then Simmonds took a scalpel, slowly cut through the fold, and peeled open the sheet. Bending his head down, he peeped at the writing on the page. The first character was an Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol. Simmonds went a little breathless. It looked like the Anthon Transcript.

If Simmonds was right, Hofmann had just found one of the most tantalizing lost documents in the history of the Mormon Church. The church faithful believe that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon by translating "reformed" Egyptian characters from golden plates that were delivered to him by an angel. Simmonds, who is not a Mormon, finds this account somewhat hilarious. Still, there was a famous early episode in which Joseph Smith copied on paper what he said were characters from the golden plates. In the late 1820s, the sheet was taken to New York, where it was examined by a Columbia University professor, Charles Anthon. No one had seen it since.

"Do you think it could be?" asked Hofmann.

Simmonds did not answer directly. Instead, calculating the archives' bank balance in his head, he offered Hofmann \$5,000.

Hofmann smiled shyly in non-commitment. Not quite yet, he said. He wanted to show the document to the church; he believed church officials would want to see what had been found. Hofmann gathered the yellow sheets with their tarry edges and headed for the Latter-day Saints Institute across the campus.

It had begun.

Logan, Utah, is the northern terminus of a miniature Mormon megalopolis running down the front of the Wasatch mountains. It stretches 100 miles south past refineries and steel mills to Provo, after which the desert once again claims its own. The center of this urban empire is Salt Lake City, and the center of Salt Lake City is a grove of buildings that house the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is the Salt Lake Temple rising out of Temple Square, the Tabernacle, and a blank-faced tower that overwhelms everything around it. The tower is named, simply, The Office Building, and it watches over the affairs of the church's 6 million members.

When Mark Hofmann walked out of the Utah State archives and into the LDS Institute, he was embraced by the church in extraordinary fashion. Within days, all of Mormondom knew of the discovery. There is a news photograph from the period that has achieved a certain fame: It shows a young Mark Hofmann bent over a table in mock study of the Anthon Transcript. At his side are five of the highest leaders of the church. At the center of the photograph stands Spencer W. Kimball, then-President, Seer, and Revelator of the Church and a man believed by the faithful to have divine revelation; he is peering at the transcript with a magnifying glass. The accompanying headline reads, "Utahn finds 1828 writing by Prophet."

For outsiders it is difficult to appreciate the importance of a discovery like the Anthon Transcript to Mormonism. In the language of the church, it is known as a "faith-promoting document," meaning it supports the church's official version of its founding events. Alone among all the major religions, Mormonism's roots lie in the recent past, not mythological time. After all, Joseph Smith died slightly more than a century ago. His life was littered with personal letters, contracts, court proceedings, and all of these can—and often are—used to scrutinize his claims to divine inspiration. Thus, acquiring a credible account of its divine origins has

Robert A. Jones is a Times staff writer.

become the church's great obsession and its peculiar vulnerability. It is as if Jesus Christ's claim of rising from the sepulcher could be challenged by motel receipts showing he had checked into a Holiday Inn the same day. For Mormonism, that threat is always present.

The Anthon Transcript protected the church from the threat, and it changed Mark Hofmann's life forever. He traded the transcript to the church archives for a collection of historical documents valued at \$20,000. The trade was tactfully omitted from church news accounts, which implied the young collector had made a donation. Hofmann left Utah State without a degree, moved to Salt Lake with his wife and two children, and began life as a professional collector.

From the very beginning, people liked him. At 24, Hofmann was shy and relentlessly eager. He worked at all hours, conducting business in an unorthodox manner. He would appear in a tattered undershirt at midnight to sell a document worth thousands of dollars. Deals were done on a handshake, and if his customers bounced a check now and then, Hofmann took it in stride. He bounced a few himself. Behind it all there was the enduring trust that Mormons have for one another; after all, Hofmann was a returned missionary.

In the next two years, a remarkable phenomenon took place. Hofmann documents were everywhere. With each find, new details of Mormon history unfolded. Hofmann produced the earliest known Mormon document; the last known document by Joseph Smith; letters and memorabilia that offered new information about crucial moments in church history. It was faith promotion of the first order, and church officials greeted the evidence with fanfare and celebration.

But the sword could swing both ways; if some documents could promote the church's interests, others could damage it. Soon, they did. Hofmann's efforts produced early church letters that cast doubt on the prophet's character. Magical rites and the occult were mentioned. One letter, nightmarish for the church, described a white, talking salamander playing a role in the discovery of the gold plates.

Soon an underground economy developed in Salt Lake; certain investors who formerly sheltered their money in oil wells and railroad cars were bidding to become part of a Hofmann document deal. Hofmann had phones installed in his cars. Yet there was a kind of innocence about the affair; it seemed to be the story of an American kid who had made good with a peculiar genius. Hofmann was still shy, still dressed in torn shirts, and never appeared the braggart—an altogether likable man.

It was not expected that Mark Hofmann was, in fact, something very different from what he seemed. It was not expected that the church was more involved with Mark Hofmann than anyone knew. It was not expected, in any quarter, that it would soon turn to betrayal, and to murder.

Two stories help to explain the peculiar mix of joy and fear that Mark Hofmann inspired in the Mormon Church. The first involves a Mormon bishop from Provo named Brent Ashworth, one of Hofmann's first customers. In the Mormon Church, bishops are the lay leaders who watch over the affairs of a ward, the rough equivalent of a Catholic parish. Ashworth has been devoted to the church his entire life; he believes in the Book of Mormon and in Joseph Smith as a prophet. Since childhood he has collected early American documents.

Ashworth is a gregarious man who speaks about himself with unsettling honesty. He admits, for example, that he cultivated Hofmann because of his own desire to become a famous Mormon, a Mormon known for acquiring documents of a faith-promoting nature. It is a measure of Mormonism's obsession with history that, for a while, Ashworth succeeded.

In Ashworth's mind, Hofmann's role would be simple: He would supply the faith-promoting documents; Ashworth, an attorney with some money to invest, would supply the financing and then let the entire Mormon world know about it.

In June, 1982, after the two men had consummated several modest deals, Hofmann arrived at Ashworth's door one evening. They went to talk business in Ashworth's den, a paneled room with walls covered in framed, rare documents. Hofmann reached into his

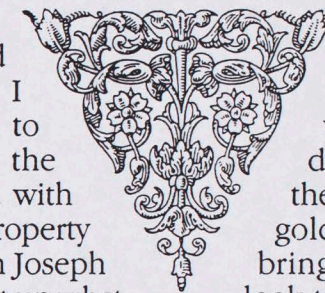
THE SALAMANDER LETTER

← The TEXT of the DOCUMENT →

The Discovery of the Gold Plates Is a Crucial Part of Mormon History. This Version Stunned Church Officials.

Dear Sir

Your letter of yesterday is received & I hasten to answer as fully as I can—Joseph Smith Jr first come to my notice in the year 1824 in the summer of that year I contracted with his father to build a fence on my property in the corse of that work I aproach Joseph & ask how it is in a half day you put up what requires your father & 2 brothers a full day working together he says I have not been with out assistance but can not say more only you better find out the next day I take the older Smith by the arm & he says Joseph can see any thing he wishes by looking at a stone Joseph often sees Spirits here with great kettles of coin money it was Spirits who brought up rock because Joseph made no attempt on their money I latter dream I converse with spirits which let me count their money when I awake I have in my hand a dollar coin which I take for a sign Joseph describes what I seen in every particular says he the spirits are greived so I through back the dollar In the fall of the year 1827 I hear Joseph found a gold bible I take Joseph aside & he says it is true I found it 4 years ago with my stone but only just got it because of the enchantment the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole & struck me 3 times & held the treasure & would not let me have it because I lay it down to cover over the hole when the spirit says do not lay it down Joseph says when can I have it the spirit says one year from to day if you obay



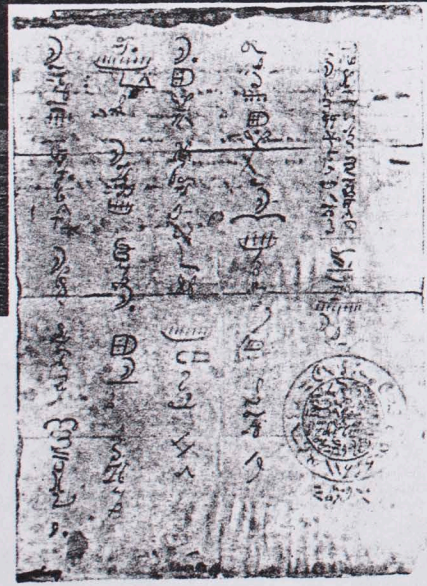
PALMYRA OCT 23D 1830

me look to the stone after a few days he looks the spirit says bring your brother Alvin Joseph says he is dead shall I bring what remains but the spirit is gone Joseph goes to get the gold bible but the spirit says you did not bring your brother you can not have it look to the stone Joseph looks but can not see who to bring the spirit says I tricked you again look to the stone Joseph looks & sees his wife on the 22d day of Sept 1827 they get the gold bible—I give Joseph \$50 to move him down to Pa [Pennsylvania] Joseph says when you visit me I will give you a sign he gives me some hiroglyphics I take them to Utica Albany & New York in the last place Dr. Mitchel gives me a introduction to Professor Anthon says he they are short hand Egyption the same what was used in ancent times bring me the old book & I will translate says I it is made of precious gold & is sealed from from view says he I can not read a sealed book—Joseph found some giant silver specticles with the plates he puts them in a old hat & in the darkness reads the words & in this way it is all translated & written down—about the middle of June 1829 Joseph takes me together with Oliver Cowdery & David Whitmer to have a view of the plates our names are appended to the book of Mormon which I had printed with my own money—space & time both prevent me from writing more at presant if there is any thing further you wish to inquire I shall attend to it

Yours Respectfully
Martin Harris



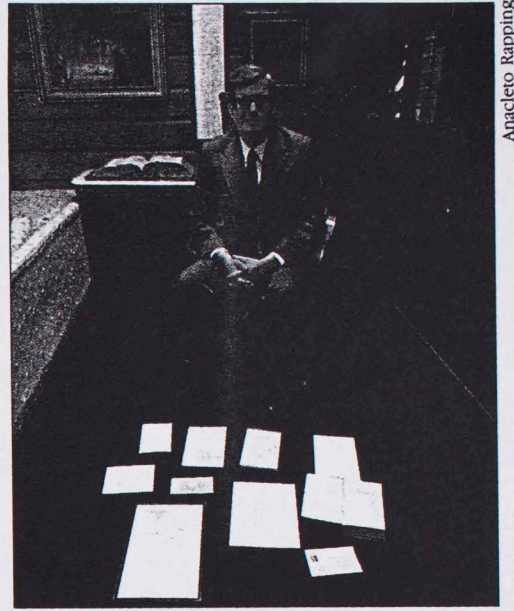
Anacleto Rapping



A. J. Simmonds, top, is the archivist first presented with Hofmann's Anthon Transcript, above; right, Spencer W. Kimball examines the document as Hofmann (at left) and four church elders—N. Eldon Tanner, Marlon G. Romney, Boyd K. Packer and Gordon B. Hinckley (from left)—look on.



Jed A. Clark, • L.D.S. Church / Used by permission



Anacleto Rapping

Brent Ashworth, eager to be a famous Mormon known for his collection of "faith-promoting" documents, cultivated Hofmann.

briefcase and handed Ashworth a letter on paper that had yellowed with age.

It was nothing less than the oldest-known Mormon document: A letter written by Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph's mother, just weeks after Joseph had reported the discovery of the gold plates. What's more, the letter revealed new details about the earliest days of the church and demonstrated Lucy Smith's ardent belief in the divine inspiration of her son's discovery.

"I have to own this," Ashworth said. Hofmann replied that it would be expensive; he was thinking in the neighborhood of \$30,000.

Ashworth did not have the cash. He started pulling framed documents off his walls, offering them as trades. He pulled down an original copy of the 13th Amendment, a Benjamin Franklin letter, an Andrew Jackson letter. The only thing Ashworth asked was that Hofmann keep quiet about his role as the supplier. He wanted to ride this discovery himself. Hofmann agreed, tucked the documents under his arm and headed back into the night.

Within weeks Ashworth had become a famous Mormon. He and his letter were featured in the church's color magazine, the Ensign, which is read by 2 million church members. Ashworth offered his opinions on television and was quoted in the Salt Lake City newspapers. A Mormon scholar published an evaluation that said the letter "knocks in the head" some anti-Mormon criticisms of the early days of the church. It was a faith-promotion festival.

The second story is shorter and less supplied with human detail—because none of the participants, thus far, have agreed to discuss it. Roughly six months after the media bonanza featuring the Lucy Smith letter, Hofmann walked into the church's headquarters with another letter. This letter was not faith-promoting. Hofmann bypassed the church archives and went directly to the office of Gordon B. Hinckley, a member of the First Presidency. It should be understood that only a handful of people in Salt Lake City could walk into Hinckley's office on demand. The First Presidency constitutes the highest office in the church; within the office are three men, a troika of elders who make virtually all major decisions.

The letter appeared to be written entirely in the hand of Joseph Smith. That alone made the letter valuable, but it was the content that demanded the attention of a man like Hinckley. It dealt with a side of Joseph Smith the church would like to forget, one that is usually referred to by the ugly name of "money digging."

In the years immediately preceding the founding of the church, Smith almost certainly had engaged in treasure hunting, a common practice in 19th-Century America. Often, the search for treasure was accompanied by arcane magical rites that, by modern standards, seem to have little to do with dignified religion. This letter referred to "clever spirits" that might guard treasure sites, and recommended techniques for foiling them. Altogether an embarrassment.

It is not known what was said by Hofmann or Hinckley. It is known that Hinckley wrote a check on a church account for \$15,000. Hofmann took the check and Hinckley took the letter.

There were no press conferences, no articles in the church magazine. Two years later a reporter for the Salt Lake Tribune, acting on a rumor, called the church press office and inquired about its existence. The press officer denied knowledge of the letter.

Like all religions, Mormonism has its own special language. In the terms of that language, the Hofmann problem was one of "correlation." For many years the church has been involved in an gargantuan effort to fit all the teachings of the church into one consistent story. That includes Sunday school lessons, missionary sermons and official history. Conflicting stories are not allowed. This effort is called the correlation program; there is even a correlation committee. Some of Hofmann's documents definitely did not correlate well.

To understand the Mormon need to correlate, you need only to take the tours through Temple Square in downtown Salt Lake City. In this collection of Mormonism's holiest buildings, volunteers tell the story of the church just the way the church wants it told.

The Book of Mormon Tour quickly gets to the crux. In 40 minutes the guide tells you—shows you, actually—the essential details: that Joseph Smith was a 17-year-old farm boy living in Palmyra, N.Y., when

an angel named Moroni led him to the gold plates on a nearby hilltop; that in 1827 Smith was given divine power to translate the reformed Egyptian characters on the plates into the Book of Mormon; and finally, that the Book of Mormon is the story of the spiritual ancestors of the Latter-day Saints, God's chosen people.

That one lesson is repeated over and over: The Mormons are a chosen people, they are the true sons and daughters of Israel in the New World, and this special place is proven by their history. The story of Joseph Smith proves it; the story of the Book of Mormon proves it. Without that history, Mormons are just another group of Christians.

Of course, for the argument to work, the story of Joseph Smith must be regarded as truth, not mythology. That is what the tour guides believe; that is what the church believes. The church needs its history, and it needs it to be told fact by correlated fact.

All of which left Mark Hofmann in an extraordinary position. Documents deemed to be faith-promoting would be snapped up by the church or Mormon collectors and widely celebrated; threatening documents would be purchased quietly and hidden away. There was a market for each.

In 1983, Hofmann and his wife, Doralee, moved to a more upscale neighborhood south of the city. The couple began to hold dinner parties for their widening circle of friends. The weekend crowd would sit in the hot tub in the backyard, and Hofmann would discuss the possibilities. Some were startling.

One of the greatest intrigues in Mormon history involves a set of papers known as the 116 Lost Pages of the Book of Mormon. Early in the process of writing the book, a disciple carried the pages to his home in another town. The pages soon disappeared and have never resurfaced. Hofmann said he thought the 116 pages were out there, somewhere; he was investigating some leads. At one dinner party he told a friend that the church had offered him \$2 million for the Lost Pages. He said he thought the offer was low. He would ask \$10 million.

On another evening Hofmann said he was also in pursuit of something known as the Cowdery History. Oliver Cowdery, one of the first church disciples, supposedly had written a history of the early church years. Hofmann said it was rumored that the collection contained a dramatically different account of the discovery of the gold plates. Then Hofmann shrugged. He had also heard, he said, that the church already owned the Cowdery History and was hiding it in a vault accessible only to the First Presidency.

Outside of Hofmann's circle, though, some scholars were skeptical. How, they asked, could one man find more lost documents than dozens of collectors had found over a period of decades? Hofmann was sanguine, claiming that he did what others were not willing to do. At times, he said, he went to extraordinary lengths to make his discoveries, even going door to door in small Utah towns. To a local

interviewer he once added, "As far as I know, I am the only person on Earth who is actively pursuing Mormon documents on a full-time basis."

The authorities seemed to agree. All of Hofmann's major documents had been checked by scholars who were experts in the handwriting of early Mormon figures. Repeatedly, they had certified the handwriting. The Anthon Transcript was the object of special scrutiny. After its acquisition by the church, archivists took the sheet to Brigham Young University for further tests. It was subjected to examinations by ultraviolet and infrared light, tests that can reveal erasures and alterations. None were found.

In late fall of 1983, Hofmann returned from a collecting trip in the East. He had found something: a letter written by Martin Harris, one of the first converts to the church. Hofmann picked up the phone and called a friend. Could he read it? He needed a judgment.

What the friend heard over the next five minutes was an account of the discovery of the gold plates. But not the standard account, not the church's account. In the letter, Harris describes a conversation with Smith on his farm in Palmyra. Harris had heard rumors that Smith had found a "gold Bible" near the farm.

In the letter Smith says the rumors are true and then describes what happened: *I found it four years ago with my stone but only just got it because of the enchantment the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole & struck me three times.*

After several more attempts and considerable teasing by the spirit, Smith relates that he finally obtains the gold Bible.

There was no fatherly figure of the angel Moroni. There was little religion at all. Just the greedy pursuit of gold and a magical, violent salamander. A cold-blooded amphibian, cousin of the newt.

When Hofmann finished reading, there was a period of silence on the phone. "What do you think?" Hofmann finally asked.

"I think you should be careful how this thing is released," the friend said. "There could be a real mess with the church."

On a cold day in the following January, a Harvard Divinity School student who occasionally served as Hofmann's business partner walked into the church archives with the Salamander Letter folded under his arm. Lyn Jacobs met with the archivist and then went to Hinckley's office in the First Presidency. President Kimball, at 89, had faded badly; Hinckley was essentially running the affairs of the church, and the student knew he needed a decision from the top.

Jacobs handed Hinckley the letter and gave him time to read it. He remembers that Hinckley's reaction was hidden; he could not tell what the man was thinking. Jacobs told Hinckley that he owned the letter and had come to offer it for sale.

This was partly a lie. After the phone conversation in Salt Lake, Hofmann had called Jacobs in Cambridge, Mass., and asked his help. The letter would surely produce a furor, and Hofmann wanted to spare his family. Would Jacobs be the front man in Salt Lake? Jacobs agreed.

In Hinckley's office, Jacobs decided to play a high-stakes game. Fully expecting a member of the First Presidency to be terror-stricken by what he was reading, Jacobs said he would accept a Mormon \$10 gold coin as a trade. About 12 such coins exist; the last one sold went for \$140,000.

Hinckley was quiet for a moment. That price may be a little high, he said. Jacobs then made a counteroffer. How about an original Mormon Book of Commandments? It was worth considerably less—probably \$40,000.

But something was wrong. Hinckley spoke quietly again. "I don't know if we really want it," he said, and the meeting ended. Jacobs left the building, confused.

Later that day Hofmann and Jacobs talked about the church's reaction. Could Hinckley have misunderstood the impact the letter would have if it got into general circulation? Neither man could figure it out. A week later Jacobs was about to return to Cambridge when Hofmann called. The Salamander Letter had been sold, he said. The buyer was a local businessman named Steven Christensen. The price was \$40,000.

It is not known why Hinckley refused the chance to buy the Salamander Letter. Perhaps he thought Jacobs would return later with a lower price; perhaps, as Jacobs speculated, he misjudged the reaction it would produce. After all, similar stories about the discovery of the gold plates had been circulated by critics of the church in the 19th Century. Every Mormon historian was familiar with them.

But that analysis did not account for modern newspapers and television. Within weeks local reporters began to receive tips about the existence of the Salamander Letter; many of these tips came indirectly from Hofmann. By early March, 1984, Steven Christensen was forced to issue a statement confirming his ownership. In the statement Christensen said he had intended to keep the letter's existence secret until experts had confirmed its authenticity.

If there is such a thing as a firestorm in religion news coverage, that is what followed. Virtually every major news organization settled onto the story, describing Harris' account in detail. For the church the situation became the incarnation of all its fears; people who knew little about Mormonism were being told that a salamander, not an angel of God, had been keeper of the gold plates. The church's closely guarded history had been turned into something comic and humiliating.

Hofmann himself never seemed to revel in the furor, publicly or privately. One day he and collector Brent Ashworth talked about the pain being inflicted on the church. Ashworth said the whole thing made him feel sick; he wondered what the church should do. Hofmann answered very quickly and casually, "If I were in their shoes, I would say the letter is a forgery."

The possibility of a forgery had also been considered by Christensen. He submitted the letter to Kenneth Rendell, an autograph expert in Newton, Mass., who had helped unmask the forgery of Hitler's diaries a few years earlier. Rendell, in turn, subcontracted some of the work to other document experts. After nearly a year of testing the Salamander Letter's paper, ink and the handwriting itself, Rendell reported that he could find no indication of tampering or forgery.

Still, there were some who were unsatisfied. The most unlikely of those was Jerald Tanner, a born-again Christian who has conducted a genteel campaign of intellectual warfare against the Mormon Church for 20 years. Operating from a Victorian home in Salt Lake, Tanner and his wife, Sandra, publish the Salt Lake Messenger, a newsletter that disgorges any and all items that might discredit the church's claims to divine origins. A historian at Brigham Young University once remarked that the Salt Lake Messenger was read by more people who denied it than any publication in Utah save for Playboy.

The Tanners wanted dearly to believe that the Salamander Letter was real. But Jerald Tanner had a problem. Like the officials at the church, Tanner was familiar with the accounts of the gold plates contained in a critical 1834 volume titled "Mormonism Unveiled." The more Tanner looked through the book, the more connections he saw between those accounts and the newly produced letter.

One version referred to a "toad" being transformed into a spirit, and there were other, similar parallels. Could the Salamander Letter be a modern plagiarism of the old affidavits? It was spooky, and Tanner was suspicious. Three times Sandra Tanner sent her husband into their backyard to pray for God's guidance. Three times Tanner came back and said the letter was a fake.

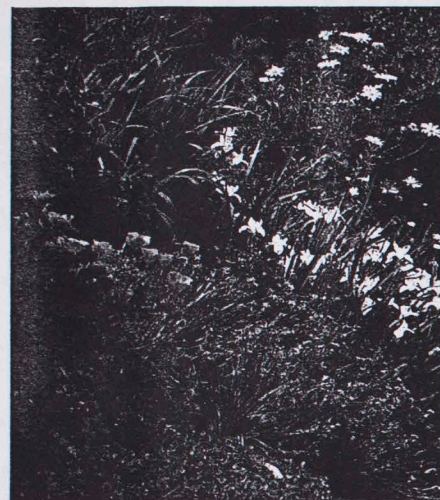
For Hofmann, these were good times. He began making regular trips to New York, dropping in on auctions and rare-book dealers. He stayed at the best hotels and sometimes left \$100 tips for waiters. Shannon Flynn, a new friend of Hofmann's who went on several of these trips, recalls walking down the streets of Manhattan one night with \$16,000 of Hofmann's cash stuffed in his pocket. "We were Utah boys in New York City," Flynn recalls. "We wanted to live dangerously, to see how it felt."

On one of the trips to New York, the two men began to talk religion. Flynn had assumed that Hofmann was a dedicated Mormon; he knew that Hofmann usually wore his "garments," the

Continued on Page 34

April 12: Gardens of the World Slide Show, at 2 p.m., South Coast Botanic Garden, Palos Verdes Peninsula.

April 14 and 15: Camellia-Pruning Demonstration, at 1:30 p.m. both days, Huntington Botanical Gardens, San Marino.



April 18 and 19: Fillmore Garden Club Flower Show, Saturday from 1 to 7 p.m. and Sunday noon to 4 p.m., Veteran's Memorial Building, 511 2nd St., Fillmore. . . . San Fernando Valley Rose Society Show, Saturday from 1 to 4:30 p.m. and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Descanso

Gardens, La Canada Flintridge. . . . Shohin Bonsai Society of Southern California Show and Sale, Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Los Angeles State and County Arboretum, Arcadia.

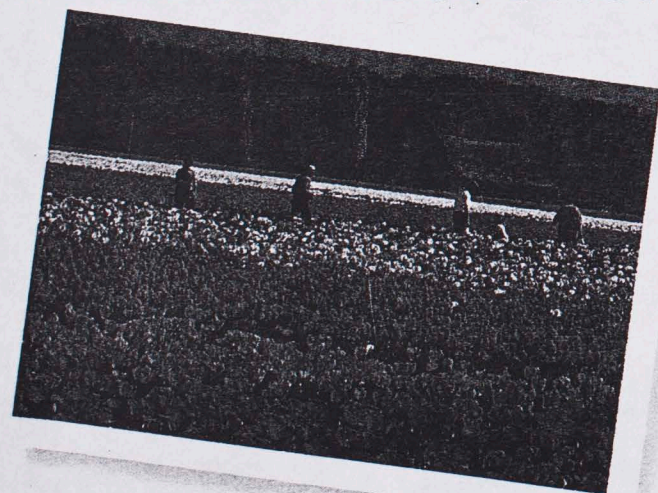
April 22: Herb Discussion, at 9:30 a.m., Sherman Library and Gardens, Corona del Mar.

April 24-26: San Fernando Valley Iris Society Show, Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m., Promenade Mall, 6100 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Woodland Hills.

April 25: Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden Open House, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 1500 N. College Ave., Claremont.

April 25 and 26: Redlands Horticultural and Improvement Society Flower Show and Garden Tour, Saturday from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Cope Junior High School, 1000 W. Cypress Ave., Redlands. . . . Southern California Iris Society Show and Sale, Saturday from noon to 6 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m., Fashion Park Mall, 400 S. Baldwin Ave., Altadena. . . . San Diego-Imperial Counties Iris Society Show, Saturday from 1 to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Casa del Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego. . . . Pacific Rose Society Show, Saturday from 1 to 4:30 p.m. and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Los Angeles State and County Arboretum, Arcadia.

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Continued from Page 12
sacred underclothing that Mormons are expected to wear throughout their lives. But suddenly, Hofmann was telling Flynn that he doubted the existence of God altogether. His own view was Darwinian, he said. The fit will survive and weaker creatures will succumb. That was the way it was.

In Salt Lake, the salamander furor refused to die down. Mormon historians who in the past had discreetly ignored certain aspects of Joseph Smith's life announced their intentions to use the letter as a point of departure for new examinations of the prophet. Adding to the injury, the church was forced to admit that it did indeed own the "money-digging" letter that Hinckley had purchased from Hofmann two years earlier. There was a buzz in the small circle of Mormon intellectuals at Brigham Young University and the University of Utah.

Ronald Walker, a history professor at BYU, wrote in the journal *Brigham Young Studies*: "At face value [the Salamander Letter] is explosive. It confirms several other documents that have been recently found indicating the 'treasure-hunting' activity of Joseph Smith prior to the organization of the Church. These finds will require a reexamination and rewriting of our origins."

In 1985 the situation worsened. The Los Angeles Times, in its news pages, printed a story that contained a startling interview with a person the newspaper identified only as a "highly reliable source." In the interview the person claimed to have read parts of the rumored Cowdery History in the church's vault. Among other things, he said, the history maintained it was not Joseph Smith who found the gold plates but his brother Alvin.

The church was losing its hold over the telling of Mormon history, and it began showing visible signs of worry. In May, 1985, the church's Historical Department wrote a letter to the collector they believed had been Hofmann's source for the Salamander Letter. The letter suggested that the collector establish a direct relationship with the church and eliminate the "middleman."

"We feel," the letter continued, "that we can establish a very pleasant working relationship with you rather than go through someone who wants our flesh and blood too."

At roughly the same time a church official telephoned Brent Ashworth, the Provo collector and local bishop. The official asked Ashworth to make some inquiries; they had heard that Hofmann had located a copy of the Lost 116 Pages of the Book of Mormon. They had also heard that the pages contained numerous references to money digging and treasure seeking. It was explained to Ashworth that the church could not afford another blow like the

Salamander Letter.

Ashworth called Hofmann. Oh, yes, Hofmann said; he knew about that. He had located a collection of papers in Bakersfield that he had thought was the 116 pages. But it turned out to be a fake. Interesting, but definitely a fake. Hofmann said he was still looking for the real thing. He would let Ashworth know.

In public, Hofmann claimed to have no sense of growing pressure. His relations with the church remained cordial. Business, after all, was business. But in June, for whatever reason, Hofmann decided to make a magnanimous gesture. He would donate a large and expensive set of early Mormon papers known as the McLellin Collection to the church. One afternoon several weeks later, Hofmann walked into The Office Building with Steven Christensen, the man who had bought the Salamander Letter. They had arranged an appointment with Hugh Pinnock, a member of the Quorum of Seventy, one of the four governing bodies of the church.

Hofmann said he had located the McLellin Collection in Texas, where it was owned by the descendants of William McLellin, an early convert who'd had a long and stormy relationship with the church. There were many interesting items in the collection, he said, and the price was \$185,000. He was able to make a donation of this size, he explained, because his agents even now were negotiating the sale of an extremely rare document—the first piece of printed matter in the United States—to the Library of Congress.

The single printed page, known as the Oath of a Freeman, was a long-lost pledge required of all members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Hofmann said he had found the oath by serendipity in a New York bookstore. His asking price was \$1.5 million.

There was one problem. Funds from the sale would not be available for some time and the McLellin Collection should be purchased quickly. Hofmann warned that other buyers were also nosing around, and some were not friendly to the church. To make the purchase now, Hofmann would need a swing loan. He was thinking perhaps Pinnock could help.

Pinnock could. He called a friend at First Interstate Bank and arranged for a loan. It was not difficult; Pinnock sat on the bank's board of directors. The church officer smiled and then said there was a favor he would like to ask in return. Christensen recorded the request in his diary:

"Elder Pinnock mentioned to Mark that sometime he would like to talk with him about retaining his services to track down two items. One was revealed as the missing 116 pages. Elder Pinnock was not in a position to reveal the second item." In his

diary, Christensen speculated that the second item might be the gold plates.

It is not clear whether Pinnock's request was entirely sincere or whether it was a strategy to keep Hofmann's future discoveries in the arms of the church, to prevent a repeat of the Salamander Letter. In any case, it is clear that the meeting in Pinnock's office represented the peak of Hofmann's career. He was about to become a wealthy man and a philanthropist. The highest leaders of the church, by all appearances, had succumbed to his talents and were asking for his help.

Just why the road turned downward at that point remains a mystery. But Hofmann was far from honest at the Pinnock meeting; he had neglected to tell the elder that he had negotiated a separate deal for the McLellin papers with a Salt Lake coin collector. He also failed to tell the collector about the meeting at the church.

The collector, Alvin Rust, had made investments in Hofmann deals before; in April, he had given Hofmann \$150,000 to purchase the McLellin Collection. When Hofmann accepted the loan from First Interstate for \$185,000, he effectively had

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collected twice for the same document.

Hofmann had never been a typical document dealer. His customers and partners had come to expect a certain level of eccentricity. In the beginning, the inconsistencies were not greeted with alarm. But gradually it became clear that the young collector was in serious trouble—of some sort.

In late June, the Library of Congress terminated all negotiations over the purchase of the Oath of a Freeman. Among other things, the library indicated, the price was a bit steep. A \$1.5-million sale had vanished; the document was returned to Hofmann's agents in New York. In August, First Interstate reported to Pinnock that Hofmann had failed to repay the loan.

Irritated, Pinnock called Hofmann and there was a testy conversation. Within days Hofmann took a check for the full amount to First Interstate. It bounced.

Several days later Hofmann tried to sell the McLellin Collection, or part of it, yet again. He appeared at the door of Brent Ashworth's Provo home. Hofmann showed him a piece of Egyptian papyrus. It was part of the McLellin Collection, he said; the papyrus had been used by Joseph Smith in a later work known as the Book of Abraham. He would let it go for \$30,000. Ashworth took the papyrus to a local expert on the Book of Abraham. The expert advised him against the purchase; he did not believe it was genuine.

Things had gotten terribly complicated.

Where, for example, was the McLellin Collection? Hofmann said it was sitting in a safe-deposit box in Salt Lake City, all three cartons of it. But no one had seen those cartons. And why was it now being sold in pieces? Was there some sabotage in progress? Or had a delicate balance been destroyed when the Library of Congress rejected the Oath of a Freeman? Even Hofmann seemed perplexed.

Steven Christensen began to press Hofmann relentlessly to repay the First Interstate loan. In early October, Hofmann met Christensen and the two drove to Pinnock's house. Only then did Hofmann tell the two men that the Library of Congress sale had fallen through; he was no longer confident he could afford to contribute the McLellin Collection to the church.

Pinnock was appalled. If this kept up the bank would lose its money, and the church would lose the McLellin Collection. Pinnock had an idea; an old friend, a wealthy businessman who was now head of the Mormon mission in Nova Scotia, might be willing to repay the loan himself. He would then donate the collection to the church. Everyone brightened at this news.

Publicly the church had said nothing about the McLellin Collection. At one point Hofmann showed them what he described as a sample from the three boxes. It confirmed their worst fears. The sample was a document that suggested that Joseph Smith may not have been the

author of the Book of Mormon.

Across town, Alvin Rust, the coin collector who had loaned Hofmann \$150,000 against the McLellin Collection, also began to press for repayment. Hofmann finally sought out Rust at a coin show. He pleaded for time and then, remarkably, for another loan. "I'm losing everything," Hofmann said. "They're coming to get my car, my home. A bank is foreclosing on me for \$185,000." Rust said there was nothing he could do.

Then there was an upturn. Pinnock reported that he had been successful with the Mormon investor. The \$185,000 would be exchanged for the documents on Oct. 11, a Friday. But the investor insisted that Steven Christensen attend the closing of the deal; he wanted him to certify that the McLellin Collection was a valuable set of documents, as advertised. To be cashed, the check would require endorsements from both Hofmann and Christensen. Just to be sure.

That Friday, Hofmann could not be found. Christensen was furious; he asked a friend to find Hofmann and tell him he was playing with excommunication from the church. And criminal charges. The closing was reset for the next Tuesday.

On Tuesday, Steven Christensen arrived at his office about 8:15 a.m. Outside the door there was a package wrapped in brown paper and bearing his name. He picked it up; the package exploded. Chunks of metal were driven into his chest. Christensen made crying sounds, like a young child, and then he died.

Three hours later Kathy Sheets returned to her suburban home from an errand. Sheets was the wife of Christensen's former business partner, Gary Sheets. Next to the garage was a package in brown wrapping paper. Kathy Sheets scooped it up; the package exploded and she died instantly.

The firm that Gary Sheets and Christensen had managed was a tax-shelter business known as Coordinated Financial Services. Christensen had recently left, and the firm was floundering. Many investors had lost money.

A collector friend called Hofmann and told him the news. The friend recalls that Hofmann seemed unsettled. "What do you think it means?" Hofmann asked. Was it connected to the Salamander Letter? Or to Christensen's business? The friend told Hofmann to be careful.

The next day, Hofmann rescheduled his plans; he would deliver the McLellin Collection that afternoon. He made a few business calls downtown. Shortly after noon, he climbed into his car, parked near Temple Square. A bomb exploded inside. It blew Hofmann into the street. The car was consumed by flames and Hofmann was seriously injured, but he would live.

Three bombs had exploded; two people were dead and one was in the hospital; the McLellin Collection had not been seen. □



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