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Fragments of the Original Manuscript

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Robert Espinosa was approached by Royal Skousen in 1991 with a request for him to join Skousen on the critical text project of the Book of Mormon. Espinosa shares his experience working with Skousen and the developments that they were able to make. After meeting with the owners of some fragments of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Espinosa and Skousen were able to conserve, examine, and photograph the fragments. They also carefully analyzed the physical characteristics of the printer’s manuscript.
Robert Espinosa separating out the Wilford Wood fragments. Photograph by David Hawkinson.
In the course of working with original documentary materials, one becomes aware that there is an eloquence in the language of the materials themselves. There is a text to be read in the materials as a whole, which no facsimile, no copy, no forgery, nothing else can reproduce. This is the wonder of working with original materials and learning to read what they have to say. Each aspect of their form—the qualities of the paper, the physical makeup, the writing medium, the marks and corrections, and all subsequent changes—is a testimony to their message. That is why the preservation of originals is so important, allowing future generations to discover for themselves the myriad layers of meaning present—and sometimes hidden—in the genuine artifact.

In order to convey the essence uncovered in the course of a careful study and reading of the whole artifact, a truly faithful rendition of original manuscripts or printed texts can be captured in the production of a critical text. This text includes information about as many aspects of the original as is possible, including all the descriptive information that can be discovered about the materials themselves. Thus an invaluable addition to the artifact itself is a complete record of a systematic study of the artifact in all its dimensions.

I was first approached by Royal Skousen in the summer of 1991 to participate in the critical text project of the Book of Mormon. At the time I was head of the conservation laboratory at Brigham Young University’s Harold B. Lee Library. Royal and I discussed our laboratory’s capabilities, our experience in conservation, our facilities, and our equipment. Royal outlined the scope and goals of the critical text project and also informed me of the existence of an unexamined clump of fragments in the Wilford Wood Museum in Bountiful, Utah, and the significance of these fragments to this project. The hope was that we might be able to provide some assistance in the recovery of these fragments, whose contents were as yet unknown. What was known was that they were alleged to be from the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, in which the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon had been placed in 1841. Royal was aware of other possible fragments in private hands that might also require careful study, if not conservation intervention.

In the summer of 1991, we began negotiations with the Wilford Wood heirs, Richard W. Glade, Leilah Wood Glade, and her sister Mary Wood Cannon. We went to Bountiful to talk about the process of conserving the fragments, and, through the course of our discussions and negotiations about this project, it became clear that the conservation work, photography, and so forth, could not really be done at the Wilford Wood Museum. We invited Richard Glade to visit our laboratory to reassure the family that our interest was professional, objective, and scientific,

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ROBERT J. ESPINOSA
and that we had the facilities, the equipment, and the expertise to work on these fragments and return them to the Wood family.

The confidence level that developed between the Wood family and the project staff was based on, I think, their judgment that indeed our interest was purely in recovering the text and in conserving the fragments, and that we had no designs on their ownership of the fragments. I think it was also clear to them that one unusual aspect about BYU’s conservation department at that time was that none of us were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and therefore we had no other motive for doing this work.

During the three weeks that we worked on the manuscript, security was very tight in the library and in the laboratory itself. Of course, rumors abounded on campus that things were happening in the library that were of great interest to the community. But the beautiful thing about those three weeks was the collaborative nature of the work on the original manuscript. We were working with Royal, of course, who was in charge of the project, and with David Hawkinson, a photographer from BYU’s Museum of Art. Of course, my staff members (Pamela Barrios and Catherine Bell) and I were all intensely involved. We also recruited other members of the campus community who might be able to provide some...
Robert Espinosa extracting the clump of fragments by removing the staples from the cellophane wrapping. Photograph by David Hawkinson.

Richard Glade and Royal Skousen looking on as Robert Espinosa examines the fragments wrapped in cellophane at the bottom of the Plexiglas box. Photograph by David Hawkinson.

The clump of Wilford Wood fragments after the removal of the cellophane wrapping. Photograph by Robert Espinosa.
Using the ultrasonic humidifier to tease apart a large fragment from the Lyman Wight petition, also placed with the original manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House. Photographs by Robert Espinosa.

Rolled-up fragment from 2 Nephi 7–8. Photograph by Robert Espinosa.

The same fragment from 2 Nephi 7–8, now unfolded but not yet flattened. Photograph by Robert Espinosa.

The same Lyman Wight fragment (pictured left), now unfolded but not yet flattened. Photograph by David Hawkinson; fragment owned by the Wilford Wood family.
assistance or help. Leilah and Richard Glade represented the Wilford Wood family heirs. So this task brought together a team of people who really were able to work very successfully and very intensely on these fragments.

The fragments had been stored in a Plexiglas box for over fifty years, the whole time that they were in the museum at Bountiful. What we extracted from that box was a clump of fragments wrapped in cellophane. The immediate task was to figure out how to dissect this extremely fragile and brittle clump of papers and discover what might lay in these fragments. We found fragments of every size and every type of paper in this clump, which measured about 150 mm × 50 mm × 15 mm.

We began by carefully separating those larger pieces that could be pried apart. The main process that we used for dissection and recovery was ultrasonic humidification. This process of moisturizing the fibers of the paper allowed the fragments to be unfolded without further damage. As the humidification process progressed, these fragments were gradually teased apart. One clump of fragments (because of its shape I humorously referred to it as the cigar fragment) contained sections from the book of Ether; it had an intact thread that had once held the whole gathering together. This gathering was very interesting and significant for Royal’s work because it revealed that, for the inner side of the center sheet in the gathering, the writing of the text goes straight across both leaves. This kind of placement of the writing occurs nowhere else in either of the Book of Mormon manuscripts. Ultimately, we were able to unfold fragments from four sheets of the Ether gathering. And it is quite amazing overall that from the entire clump of papers we were able to identify fragments from fifty-eight pages of the original manuscript.

The whole laboratory was dedicated to this work during the course of the three weeks (in September and October 1991). The fragments were very carefully classified and gathered together. We noted the placement of different fragments as they came off the clump, together with any kind of association that might be helpful in terms of reconstruction. We used reflected ultraviolet photography to help read these fragments because the ink in most cases was extremely faded.
Some of the larger fragments in the clump were not from the Book of Mormon itself but were from a petition. In other words, not every piece of paper in the clump was from the original manuscript. There were also very small fragments from an 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon as well as small fragments from a King James Bible.

One of the procedures that helped us identify and locate the fragments was examining the paper types. In the course of our work, we discovered four different paper types among the Wilford Wood fragments of the original manuscript. Actually, what we were looking for was the physical characteristics of the paper—namely, the surface texture and the wire marks, what we might call watermarking, which are the “footprints” of the production process of paper-making. These characteristics helped to distinguish one paper from the next—that is, to distinguish one paper production run from another. Paper A had a very distinct and open set of wire marks. Paper B/D had almost no distinguishable wire marks but had a very pulpy and particular formation of the fibers. Paper C had a distinct pattern of the pulp and of the wire. And paper E from the Ether gathering again had a particular kind of pulp formation.

The final step in this conservation process was to organize the fragments and to use an ultrasonic encapsulation machine to protect them in Mylar. We placed the fragments into sheets divided into four quadrants.

Having established these types of pulp and wire marks in the Wilford Wood fragments, we were later able to go to the Historical Department in Salt Lake City to make a comparison with the larger extant sheets of the original manuscript. There we found two of the same paper types (namely, A and B/D), plus one additional type of paper (labeled F) for the first part of 1 Nephi. Our analysis confirmed that each paper type was restricted to a single continuous portion of the original manuscript.

In 1994 we went to Independence, Missouri, to examine the printer’s manuscript. I again carried out

The conservators working on the fragments in their lab in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, September–October 1991. Photograph by David Hawkinson.
Fragment from 2 Nephi 25, showing the improvement in readability when photographed in black-and-white using reflected ultraviolet light. Photographs by David Hawkinson; fragment owned by the Wilford Wood family.
Robert Espinosa checking the encapsulated fragments. Photograph by David Hawkinson.

Encapsulating some of the Wilford Wood fragments in Mylar. Photograph by Robert Espinosa.

We are fortunate in having the entire printer’s manuscript. As a result we were able to verify that each gathering of the printer’s manuscript always consisted of a single paper type—that is to say, no gathering was made up of two or more different paper types. There were multiple gatherings of a single paper type, but every gathering was always made from the same type of paper. Thus we were able to corroborate what we thought we had discovered in the original manuscript.

In the printer’s manuscript we identified eight different types of paper. None of the paper types in the printer’s manuscript seemed to correspond at all with the types of paper found in the extant portions of the original manuscript, so in all there are (at least) thirteen different types of paper in these two manuscripts.

We only have a few opportunities in our professional careers to be involved with truly significant projects that demand all our professional acumen and expertise. To work in the field of book and paper conservation affords some unique opportunities. I have worked on many great books, principally manuscripts and early printed books at the Library of Congress, one of which was the Gutenberg Bible. I have also treated the original library of Thomas Jefferson, as well as early documents of the Founding Fathers. At the Harold B. Lee Library, early Christian papyri, medieval manuscripts, and numerous early printed books have come through my hands. But no project, before or since, compares with the thrill and intensity of working on this project, whose focus was this most unique of American religious texts, the Book of Mormon, and its manuscripts. I am honored to be associated with the critical text project, and I thank Royal Skousen for granting me this privilege.
The four paper types of the Wilford Wood fragments of the original manuscript, magnified here 12 times. Photographs by Robert Espinosa.