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The Printer's Manuscript

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Ronald E. Romig, archivist for the RLDS Church (now renamed the Community of Christ), played a significant role in Royal Skousen’s critical text project. Romig was responsible for overseeing the handling of the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon, which was made available on two different occasions for Skousen to examine for his research. Skousen also examined over twenty copies of the first edition of the Book of Mormon belonging to the Community of Christ. Romig explains his responsibilities and the process of assisting Skousen in the project and also mentions how Skousen’s work has improved the relationship between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ.
Royal Skousen’s initial contact with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (officially renamed the Community of Christ in April 2001) was in 1988 with Richard Howard, who at the time was the RLDS church historian. Richard made available a very good, high-quality copy of the printer’s manuscript (called the copyflow) that Royal used to prepare his initial transcript of the manuscript. During that same year I accepted the position of archivist for the RLDS Church, but was unaware of the critical text project until Royal returned the copyflow of the printer’s manuscript to us.

I assumed that with the return of the copyflow, our contact with Royal would be ended. Although I hoped that the results of his research would soon be in print, prior experience with people who want to pursue similar projects—making corrections in the Book of Mormon and perhaps printing a revised edition—had shown me that they quickly lost enthusiasm when they realized the magnitude of the project. And so I assumed the same would be true with this Royal Skousen from Utah. But everyone knows Royal is different.

Now that Royal’s transcripts of the manuscripts are in print, it is fitting to recognize this remarkable accomplishment. Not only Royal, but his wife Sirkku and their family also merit credit—not only because they supported Royal’s long-term commitment to this project, but also because Sirkku herself was a key participant in many aspects of the research.

In 1991, I began to grasp the scope of the critical text project. It was Royal’s intention, using both the original and printer’s manuscripts, to get as close as possible to the original text and to trace subsequent changes to the text. Royal had begun by making his transcripts from photographs of the original manuscript and from the copyflow of the printer’s manuscript. If this was all that had been involved, I may have never met Royal, but he wished to be sure of some points by consulting the actual printer’s manuscript. My most memorable experiences during my

The enlarged photocopy of the printer’s manuscript (called the copyflow), loaned to the Book of Mormon critical text project in 1988. For size comparison, the photo also shows an original copy of the 1830 edition.
tenure as church archivist are associated with the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Perhaps the most unforgettable occurred during the preparation for Royal and Sirkku’s first visit to the library archives in April 1991.

In 1850, the printer’s manuscript passed from Oliver Cowdery to David Whitmer, from whom George Schweich, Whitmer’s grandson, received it in 1888. Schweich sold it to the RLDS Church in 1903. Since that time, the printer’s manuscript had mostly been stored off-site from church headquarters in a bank vault in Kansas City. It was occasionally retrieved and placed on display. But, for the most part, even RLDS scholars had only had limited access to the actual manuscript. The church had made an effort to provide microfilm copies for scholarly use, including one copy for Brigham Young University in 1968, but access to the printer’s manuscript itself was very limited. Once every decade we would get it out of the bank vault and have it on display one day during conference, and then it would be back in the vault for another decade.

When we first heard that Royal wanted to inspect the actual manuscript, you can imagine what this did to our view of how the manuscript should be handled. Nothing like this had ever happened in RLDS circles before. As the newly appointed church archivist and only having been employed in that position for a short time, it was a great responsibility having to make the arrangements to get this manuscript available for research. It took no less than the direct participation of a member of the church’s First Presidency, a member of the Presiding Bishopric (who is in charge of the financial affairs of the Community of Christ), Paul Edwards, the director of the Temple School (which had responsibility for the archives), and me. So together, we ceremoniously drove to Kansas City. The bishop, who had the key to the safe-deposit box, opened the box and handed the manuscript to the member of the First Presidency, who handed it to Paul Edwards, who handed it to me. We brought it back to Independence, and so we were ready when Royal and Sirkku arrived a few days later.

The presence of the manuscript was going to cause quite a bit of excitement, so we created a private work area in the library archives, at that time located in the auditorium, the large domed building across the street from the temple. Royal brought his transcription and began to examine the manuscript, comparing the transcript against the actual document. While he was doing that, Sirkku and I had the opportunity of doing a descriptive bibliography of the manuscript—measuring the leaves, including their thickness, and describing other characteristics of each page. Checking the transcription and doing the descriptive bibliography took two weeks.
In October 1992, the necessity for color photographs occasioned Royal’s second visit to Independence. This time he was accompanied by his brother Nevin Skousen, who brought his own equipment with him. Because the printer’s manuscript had never been photographed in color, this was another historic occasion. Nevin was an exceptionally skillful photographer and was perfectly matched for the important and challenging job of precisely filming the manuscript. Working together, we shot color negatives of the manuscript; it took two complete days to photograph the 466 pages of the manuscript.

While Nevin was having the film developed in Kansas City, Royal wanted to examine the entire collection of first-edition copies of the Book of Mormon in the RLDS library archives. These copies of the 1830 edition are stored off-site at the Church Records Center, so I had the task of transporting them from the repository to the library archives, where we were working. I will never forget the tension I felt during that drive from the records center to church headquarters, with more than twenty copies of the first edition on the back seat of my car. At that time each copy would have been conservatively valued at about $10,000. Royal completed his examination, and the books were returned to storage without incident.

Royal and Nevin then drove back to Utah, and two weeks later I flew to Utah with the negatives. We then worked two full days in Nevin’s lab to create two sets of color prints from the negatives. Nevin used an enlarger to project each negative image onto photographic paper and then fed the exposed paper through his mini-photo lab. Each print took four minutes to travel through the machine. I tended the output rollers, separating the prints into two stacks as they emerged. The work was hot and largely done in the dark. Finally, Royal inspected the prints to ensure that each image was acceptable.

With this new research tool successfully created, I returned to Missouri, taking with me the negatives and one set of the color prints and leaving the other set in Royal’s care. Subsequently, Royal helped the RLDS library archives acquire a refrigerator in which we now store the negatives to further ensure their long-term preservation.

In June 1994, Royal and Sirkku returned to the RLDS archives for a second detailed examination of the printer’s manuscript. This time Royal checked for page rulings, finding that the spacing between the lines of text often varied from page to page. Sirkku and I checked pages for small scratches (or take marks) left by the 1830 compositor (that is, typesetter). Royal theorized that each time the compositor completed a stick of type, from 11 to 13 lines of type, he had marked his progress in the manuscript with a small impression, sometimes slightly cutting the paper. These marks are sometimes best discerned when viewed with a low-angle light.

While we worked on these take marks, Royal focused on corrections made in dark ink.
found throughout the manuscript. These changes, nearly all grammatical, have traditionally been identified as the work of Joseph Smith when he edited the manuscript before printing the 1837 Kirtland edition. Using a hand microscope, Royal found that the ink in Joseph Smith’s later corrections contains visible speckles, unlike the dark ink he used earlier on in his editing of the manuscript.

Doing research on the printer’s manuscript, June 1994, Independence, Missouri: Ron Romig, archivist for the Community of Christ; Sirkku and Royal Skousen; and conservator Robert Espinosa.

During this 1994 visit, BYU conservator Robert Espinosa joined us to examine the paper types in the printer’s manuscript. Robert identified eight different types of paper. All the papers are of the same basic size, referred to as “foolscap.” One high-quality paper bears an O&H watermark. Three gatherings (9, 10, and 13) are composed of this paper. Four more gatherings (11, 15, 16, and 17) are from the same paper company but come from a different batch of paper and do not have the O&H watermark. Because of their high rag content, all the papers used for the printer’s manuscript are in good condition.

Later that week, several visitors from LDS church headquarters in Salt Lake City came: Brian Reeves, an employee of the Historical Department; Richard Turley, director of the department; and Stephen Nadauld, the LDS church historian at that time. They brought samples of paper from the original (dictated) manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Robert continued his examination of the paper types by comparing the papers between the two manuscripts and found that none of the papers in the printer’s manuscript matched any of those from the original. Rick and Steve soon left, but Brian stayed and helped Sirkku and me in our continuing examination of the printer’s manuscript. We were able to determine that there were no compositor’s marks in gatherings 16 through 19 of the printer’s manuscript, which confirmed Royal’s belief that this portion of the manuscript was not used to set the type for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. A possible explanation would be that scribes could not keep up in their copy work. Rather than slow up the printing, they let the compositor use the original manuscript to typeset this part of the text (from near the end of the book of Helaman to the end of Mormon).

After Robert and Brian returned to Utah, Royal paced himself for the rest of the week, examining specific details in the printer’s manuscript, but restricting his time on each page to about three minutes in order to finish the task by the end of the week. By Friday morning, Sirkku and I had completed our list of take marks and Royal still had 100 pages left to examine, which he was able to finish by midday.

But in addition to completing his examination of the printer’s manuscript, Royal wanted to see the 1830 editions again. And so I had the delightful opportunity to bring him 22 copies again from the records center. By that time, the value of each copy had increased to about $15,000. We lined them up on a vault shelf for Royal’s review. Royal again checked for in-press changes made during the printing process. Variations between copies allowed him

Checking the paper types in the printer’s manuscript, June 1994: Brian Reeves of the LDS Historical Department, Royal Skousen, and Robert Espinosa.
to identify the sequence of printing for many of the book’s 37 gatherings.

Not only is Royal one of a handful of scholars to ever work directly with the printer’s manuscript in its original format, he is also one of the last to work with it in that format. When obtained by the RLDS Church in 1903, the printer’s manuscript was composed of large sheets of paper, each folded in half to make a folio of two leaves or four pages. Typically, six sheets were arranged into gatherings of 24 numbered pages. The manuscript thus was a stack of 21 gatherings, with the text reading from front to back like a book.

But soon after Royal’s last visit (in 1994) and as a result of this critical text project, the printer’s manuscript underwent conservation in Salt Lake City at the Historical Department there.

This conservation process lasted about six months and was done under the direction of Dale Heaps. The procedure was very detailed. First of all, we had to establish that the ink was insoluble, and then we were able to wash the leaves to remove the dirt, grime, and oil that had accumulated through the years. In another bath, we treated the leaves with deacidifying chemicals in order to prevent further deterioration.

Findings about the Printer’s Manuscript

1. For several of the gatherings, the typesetter cut the manuscript leaves in order to facilitate the typesetting. At some later time, these cut portions were pinned together in their correct order.

2. Some corrections were done immediately by the original scribe, some by a correcting scribe, some by the typesetter, and some considerably later by Joseph Smith (for the 1837 edition). In the printer’s manuscript, Joseph Smith made over two thousand changes to the text by overwriting the original words or by crossing out words and inserting other words between the lines. These changes are mostly grammatical, but some involve clarification.

3. The scribes used a variety of paper types, with different thicknesses. Some of the sheets were lined in advance, others were lined by the scribe page by page as the copying took place. The watermark O&H is found on a handful of leaves.

4. The printer’s manuscript does not contain any part of the original manuscript. The gatherings of the two manuscripts were never mixed up, even though for gatherings 16–19 of the printer’s manuscript, the original manuscript was instead taken to the printer. In 3 Nephi 19 an unknown scribe (identified as scribe 2 of the printer’s manuscript) took over while Oliver Cowdery jumped ahead to start copying Ether (which begins gathering 20).

When scribe 2 finally finished Mormon (at the end of gathering 19), he left the rest of the page blank. This nearly blank page is the last page of a short gathering of three sheets (12 pages). There are no other partially blank pages within either the original or printer’s manuscript.

5. Gatherings 16–19 of the printer’s manuscript were not used by the printer. These gatherings show none of the typesetter’s marks or corrections. This observation is confirmed by the presence of the typesetter’s punctuation marks on corresponding fragments of the original manuscript.

6. Chapter specifications in the manuscripts are not original to the text. The chapter numbers were almost always added later. One of these chapter numbers (on page 261 of the printer’s manuscript) is in blue ink rather than the normal black ink (now turned brown).

—Royal Skousen

Above: The original form of the printer’s manuscript, a stack of 21 gatherings (each typically having six folded sheets), placed for size comparison in front of a facsimile 1830 edition.
of the paper. After washing and deacidifying the leaves, Dale flattened them and reattached many of the leaves that had come apart—some had been cut during the typesetting of the 1830 edition. All those leaves were repaired and put back as far as possible into their original form. Finally, the leaves were encapsulated in Mylar. Dale also created a magnificent box in which the manuscript is now stored. Thus you have, in a sense, visual proof of the lasting legacy of the critical text project. While scholarly access to the manuscript is now possible, it is aesthetically an entirely different experience.

All these things might not have happened—the printer’s manuscript might still be sitting in a bank vault in Kansas City—had Royal not been inspired to undertake this project. Royal’s project has proven enormously significant. In addition to producing the definitive scholarly resource, Royal has forever changed the way we do Book of Mormon scholarship. His efforts have led to improved cooperation and extended contact between the LDS and the Community of Christ scholarly communities, and indeed the very way these religious institutions interact in the historical arena.