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MSI Technology Reveals Provenance of Rare Brigham Young Portrait

An important research technology, whose application to ancient research FARMS has helped pioneer, has recently been applied successfully in the field of Mormon studies.

For nearly four years Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, professor of church history and doctrine at BYU, has been collecting all the known images of Brigham Young in an effort to assemble a complete photographic record of him. In the 1840s and 1850s Brigham Young was among the first generation of Americans to have their likenesses preserved by the newly introduced daguerreotype process. As improvements in photography paralleled the increasing visibility of his life, he sat for numerous photographs in the 1860s and 1870s.

However, virtually all publications reproducing visual images of this Mormon leader contain errors in dating photographs and identifying the photographers. While many historians have not applied the same careful research standards to a 19th-century photograph as they would to a diary or letter from that period, many scholars now suggest that properly documenting photographs, like other primary sources, is no longer merely a helpful service to the reader but an essential part of historical research, writing, and publication.

Before her death in 1933, Susa Young Gates, a daughter of Brigham Young, assembled an important collection of photographs of her father. Like many such collections, it was later divided up among family members and is now scattered. Gates often provided useful information about the photographs in her notations on them. A splendid example of this follows.

One of Gates's descendants, Lurene Gates Wilkinson, owns a beautifully framed oval portrait of Brigham Young. This portrait is an unusual view of him, one quite rare and not reproduced in LDS publications (see fig. 1). When the 8-by-10-inch portrait was removed from the frame, it was clear that it had once belonged to Gates, apparently as part of the collection she had assembled many years ago. She had written in cursive on the back of the photograph at the top "Pres. Brigham Young—" and on the bottom half "No I [No. 1] Return to Susa Young Gates." Between those two notations something else had been written in pencil, but the text had been thoroughly erased and could not be read (see fig. 2).

Attempts to recover the faded writing failed until Steven W. continued on page 3
MSI Technology (continued from page 2)

Booras of the FARMS Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (CPART) applied multispectral imaging (MSI) to the task. Using a computer-controlled digital camera with a tunable filter, he was able to capture the otherwise invisible text (see fig. 3), which reads: "Picture of Brigham Young which hung in the old Historian Office for many years. Given to Susa Young Gates by Elder Joseph Fielding Smith & Pres. Lund when the Church Office was built in 1911, and the Historians Office was opened in that building—My favorite picture—Would like 5 or 6 copies.[]"

Now we know the provenance of the photograph and also have an assessment of its value by one of Brigham Young's daughters. Born in 1856, Susa Young Gates was well acquainted with her father. Her statement on the back of the photograph indicates that of all the images of her father she collected, this one was her favorite. This kind of information is of great interest to historians and biographers, who use such clues in their research and writing to construct a clearer window on past events and personalities.

FARMS continues to apply multispectral imaging to ancient research (e.g., the Herculaneum project that will soon be in full operation—see the February 1999 issue of Insights). But CPART's recent use of MSI technology to assist with Holzapfel's photographic project points toward the potential that multispectral imaging has for unlocking the doors not only to old photographs but also to other 19th-century documents, such as diaries and letters, that at this time are unreadable.

Based on research by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel

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