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## The American Home Missionary Society Collection and Mormonism

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# The Historians Corner

Edited by Ronald W. Walker

“Sorted till I was stupified,” James Boswell penned in his journal in June 1786. He was, of course, trying to arrange the mountains of material he had collected on Samuel Johnson before starting the latter’s biography. Latter-day Saint historians have experienced similar despair. The large LDS-related manuscript collections that must be mastered have been both the boon and bane of the historian’s craft.

Therefore, scholars will presumably greet this issue of the Historians Corner as a mixed blessing. Dr. Roger Launius, who is currently a civilian historian with the U.S. Air Force Military Airlift Command, describes an important manuscript collection that LDS scholars have scarcely mined. The papers of the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS), located at the Amistead Research Center in New Orleans, Louisiana, help to illustrate Mormonism throughout its nineteenth-century hegira. Written by Congregational, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Associate Reformed frontier ministers, the LDS-related papers in the AHMS collection provide an outside and not always friendly view of the Saints. Consequently, they help to explain the negative image of nineteenth-century Mormonism, a continuing interest of present-day scholars.

## THE AMERICAN HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY COLLECTION AND MORMONISM

Roger Launius

Historians of American religion have long known of the wealth of material contained in the collection of the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS), located at the Amistead Research Center, the

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Roger Launius, a civilian historian with the Military Airlift Command, United States Air Force, has recently finished a two-volume dissertation at Louisiana State University on Joseph Smith III.

Old U.S. Mint, New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>1</sup> Occupying 234.8 linear feet of shelf space, the AHMS collection is a significant part of the Center's holdings and consists of over 100,000 letters from Calvinist ministers traveling on the American frontier as well as 150 letterpress books containing official correspondence from the New York office.

Although the collection dates from 1816 to 1936, the great bulk of the material is dated between 1826 and 1893, the effective period of the society's existence. The incoming correspondence of the AHMS collection is arranged alphabetically by state and chronologically within states. It contains letters from missionaries in every state and territory except Alaska, Arizona, and New Mexico, having exceptionally large sets from missionaries in Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The outgoing letterpress books are bound and filed chronologically.<sup>2</sup> Most of the letters concerning the Latter-day Saints are found in the following state subsections:

State	Inclusive Dates	Quantity
California	1849-93	1 Box
Colorado	1860-93	1 Box
Idaho	1872-93	1 Folder
Illinois	1839-46	7 Boxes
Missouri	1831-39	1 Box
New York	1819-31	9 Boxes
Ohio	1831-38	4 Boxes
Utah	1864-93	2 Folders

A major difficulty of the collection for historians interested in Utah Mormonism will be two significant gaps in the incoming correspondence. For some unknown reason no letters exist for any state's operations during 1874-75 and 1878-91. In spite of this problem, the letters found for other periods still make this collection a valuable resource.

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<sup>1</sup>The Amistead Research Center was founded in 1966 by the American Missionary Society and six affiliated colleges to preserve materials relating to more than one hundred and fifty years of religious activity of Calvinist churches, especially among American blacks. (*The Amistead Research Center* [New Orleans: The Amistead Research Center, n.d.], pp. 1-2. See also William Warren Sweet, *The Congregationalists: A Collection of Source Materials*, vol. 3 of *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1850* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939]; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950]; Louis Filler, *The Crusade against Slavery, 1830-1860* [New York: Harper, 1960]; Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800-1865* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960].)

<sup>2</sup>"Holdings of the Amistead Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana," June 1981 (Mimeograph pamphlet in possession of author).



The American Home Missionary Society was founded in 1826 to provide money and leadership to fledgling Calvinist groups on the American frontier and to support their efforts until they could become self-sufficient. Within a year of its organization the society had a budget of \$18,000 and employed 169 missionaries in fifteen states; by 1832 it supported 506 missionaries in twenty states.<sup>3</sup> The society continued to grow almost steadily thereafter.

For the student of Mormon history, the AHMS collection could be of value principally because of the correspondence sent by missionaries to the central office. Each man working for the society was required to make periodic reports to supervisors. Although these generally contained accounts only of current activities, number of services held, number of conversions, and general comments on the state of the mission, in some cases ministers wrote about the activities of other Protestant denominations, about the success of revivals, about the nature of life and culture in their districts, and, in a few cases, about the early Mormon movement.

The ministers' observations were based on experience with the Latter-day Saints at the local level. The AHMS missionaries had no sympathy with Mormonism and commented harshly, but oftentimes with a freshness not seen among others.

In 1830 the AHMS had over twenty-five missionaries in New York State. Geneva (a small town about twenty miles southeast of Palmyra) was the seat of the society's western New York district. Missionaries operating in the area quickly learned about Joseph Smith, Jr., and his work. John Sherman, Congregational missionary at Colesville, wrote of his personal experiences with Mormonism. "I will relate a circumstance that has given me pain," Sherman wrote to his superiors in a November 1830 report.

A member of the church at Sandford, a young female, has renounced her connexion with the church, and joined another, a church in Colesville founded by Joseph Smith. This man has been known in these parts for some time, as a kind of [charlatan], who has pretended, through a glass, to see money under ground, &c, &c. The book, on which he founds his new religion, is called the "Book of Mormon." It contains not much, and is rather calculated to suit the marvelous, and unthinking part of the world. . . . No man in his right mind can think the Book or the doctrines it contains, worthy

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<sup>3</sup>Daniel G. Horvath, ed., *A Guide to the Microfilm Edition of the Papers of the American Home Missionary Society, 1816 (1826-1894) 1936* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1975), pp. 1-5.

of the least notice, yet there are a number who profess to believe in it.<sup>4</sup>

Observations by missionaries in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois are equally intriguing. For example, one Congregational minister from Painesville, Ohio, wrote to the society's New York office in 1831 complaining of the rise of the Mormon community at Kirtland: "The sweep of this new denomination in this vicinity has been humiliating & distressful."<sup>5</sup> However, the files containing correspondence by AHMS missionaries from western Illinois during the 1840s are by far the most useful of those files treating early Mormonism. Society missionaries wrote extensively about Nauvoo society, politics, culture, and religion. They particularly directed their comments toward the relationship of the Saints with the rest of society. For instance, on 5 July 1839, the Reverend T. K. Hawley wrote from LaHarpe (located in the northeastern part of Hancock County) to his superiors about the Mormon migration from Missouri: "The population of this vicinity is increasing quite rapidly, but much of this increase is not of a very desirable character. Three families of Mormons have recently come in, & others are expected."<sup>6</sup>

The Reverend Milton Kimball, who operated an AHMS mission in Augusta (a farming community in the southeastern part of Hancock County), began his work in early 1844. In a series of letters spanning three years he wrote to the society's directors, never failing to mention the Saints. Describing the Mormons as evils "worse than famine & pestilence," and as "malignant fanatics, thieves, robbers, & assassins, on principle," the Reverend Kimball exclaimed:

We know that God can arrest and fix the attention of men amidst the strong excitements which agitate this region infested with Mormonism. But how few will see the hand of God in such a calamity as the location of the Mormons in this county, although it is as true that he has sent them as that he sent the lice or the frogs upon Egypt. We know that we ought to seek him who has smitten us for help.

Out of the Mormon adversity the residents of the county could become better Christians, the reverend told his superiors.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>John Sherman to Absolem Peters, 18 November 1830, AHMS Collection. The Reverend Wesley P. Walters suggests that the woman referred to in this reference may have been Emily Austin (Wesley P. Walters, "The Abduction of Emily Austin," Address to the John Whitmer Historical Association Annual Meeting, 25 September 1982, St. Louis, Mo.).

<sup>5</sup>William M. Adams to Absolem Peters, 14 March 1831, AHMS Collection.

<sup>6</sup>T. K. Hawley to Milton Badger, 5 July 1839, AHMS Collection.

<sup>7</sup>Milton Kimball to Milton Badger, 11 November 1844, 15 May 1845, 10 February 1845, AHMS Collection.



The following letter describes from a non-Mormon perspective the interaction of the Saints and the other residents of Hancock County. The Reverend Kimball probably spoke for many of the non-Mormons of the area when he described the Saints' block voting patterns and their courting of officials. His charge that Latter-day Saint "voters never think, or reason, but go by direction of immediate revelation to the party that will give the most, and hence there is no portion of the people so highly valued by our demagogues as the mormons" is of particular interest.<sup>8</sup> But the Reverend Kimball also wrote forebodingly of future conflict between the Saints and the gentiles in the county, suggesting that peaceful coexistence was no longer possible and concluding that in order to avoid open conflict the Saints would have to leave the county or "the citizens have some better pledge of safety than the principles or practices of the mormons have hitherto afforded them." Kimball's letter of 11 November 1844 follows:<sup>9</sup>

Augusta Han Co. Ill. 11 Nov, 1844.

Cor. Secy. A.H.M.S.

Owing to the delays in procuring my commission, it did not arrive, till Some four months of the year had elapsed, & I thought it best to include in my first report, one half the year, specially as in these times postage is a consideration & a draft upon N.Y. in these distant parts of fifty doll<sup>s</sup> is much more Salable than one of half the amount.

I have pursued my work the last six months, under circumstances, of much difficulty. We learn that at the east you have, of late, witnessed two great revivals: the one of politics, the other of business. The former we have had in common with you, but the revival of business, has hardly reached us, The destructive rains of the last two seasons, having cut-off most of the surpluss produce. But instead of this, the revival of Mormon agitation has swept like a hurricane over these parts, leaving many marks of its destructive fury. It has not yet ceased, and tho there is now an apparent calm, it cannot cease until this whole region is abandoned to the mormons, or the citizens have some better pledge of safety than the principles or practices of the mormons have hitherto afforded

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<sup>8</sup>This may have been a reference to the Sixth Congressional District election of 1843 in which Hyrum Smith, at the direction of the Prophet, proclaimed a revelation which stipulated that the Saints should vote for the Democratic candidate, Joseph P. Hoge. In this case the Mormon vote gave Hoge the election, for while Hoge won a majority of votes in the district, receiving 7,796 ballots to 7,222 for the Whig Cyrus Walker, Hoge's plurality in Nauvoo was an overwhelming 2,088 to 733. (See George R. Gaylor, "The Mormons and Politics in Illinois, 1839-1844," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 49 [Spring 1956]: 48-66; Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965], pp. 234-39; Theodore H. Pease, "Illinois Election Returns, 1818-1848," *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library* 18 [1923]: 117, 125, 140.)

<sup>9</sup>Milton Kimball to Milton Badger, 11 November 1844, AHMS Collection. I have maintained Kimball's spelling and punctuation throughout this document, including cross-outs and underlining.



them. We know that nothing should separate christians from God, the rock of their strength. But the temptation amidst such causes of constant irritation as here exist, is very great to indulge such feeling as cannot consist with acceptable prayer. We have reason to believe that the brethren, notwithstanding ~~that our people~~ have maintained to some good degree the Spirit of prayer and I believe, that last Summer; we were saved from witnessing scenes of massacre, by by [*sic*] the prayers of those that trusted in God —He heard their cry, and restrained the rage of those who delight in war.

What will be the end of these things, we cannot conjecture. The  
 mormons  
 great question now is, will God give them union, & a head, capable, like Jo, of putting down the factions. If So they will be formidable beyond what is commonly imagined. Scarcely had they commenced their city, when they obtained the control of the legislation of the State, acquired privileges which no others would have the impudence to ask for, and they have maintained an influence over the other departments of government wholly disproportionate to their numbers. This is done by the same means that have expelled the bible, from so many of the schools of N York.

Nauvoo is a true daughter of Rome & has played the harlot with the political parties in the same manner & with similar success — The party press she has held in subservency. The voters never think, or reason, but go by direction of immediate revelation to the party that will give the most, and hence there is no portion of the people so highly valued by our demagogues as the mormons. The Romanist always excepted, since the government of the county has fallen into the hands of these men Our people feel themselves in great difficulty. But God will scatter his enemies, and save his heritage.

The arrangement that all the missionaries shall preach on the subject of Home Miss. I am glad to see adopted. & if it pleases the Lord, I Shall Soon preach on that Subject.

Yours in the Lord  
 Milton Kimball

Almost at the same time the majority of the Church migrated to the Great Basin under Brigham Young's leadership, AHMS missionaries began moving into western territories to organize Calvinist congregations. Soon after arriving in mid-1864 to oversee the AHMS activities in Colorado, the Reverend Jonathan Blanchard began to hear stories about a fruitful missionary field in Utah and became intensely interested in opening a mission for the benefit of the non-Mormons living in the territory. Consequently, on 10 October 1864 the Reverend Blanchard wrote to Milton Badger, corresponding secretary for the Society, explaining the opportunity for the AHMS in Utah and asking permission to begin work there. "Salt Lake City has twenty thousand people, without religious teaching except the ribald

babbling of Mormons,” he told Badger. The “children are growing up without Sabbath Schools, and there are not one hundred decent books in the whole territory. . . . If the Gospel is preached in the whole territory I do not know where.”<sup>10</sup>

Just a few days before sending this request the Reverend Blanchard had written to Brigadier General Patrick Edward Connor, commander of the District of Utah, to inquire about the potential for a non-Mormon mission in Salt Lake City. General Connor and his Third California Volunteers, comprising between 750 and 1,500 troops, had been mustered into the Union army and sent to Utah in 1862 to protect the overland stage and telegraph routes during the Civil War, to prevent Indian hostilities, and to keep an eye on the Mormons.<sup>11</sup> Immediately tensions between the Mormon and gentile populations had arisen, prompting General Connor to boast that he would “invite hither a large Gentile and loyal population, sufficient by peaceful means and through the ballot box to overwhelm the Mormons by mere force of numbers.”<sup>12</sup> He soon found what he thought was an ideal means of luring gentile immigrants into the territory when he discovered valuable minerals in the canyons surrounding Salt Lake City.

The following letter is Connor’s reply to the Reverend Blanchard. It invites the AHMS to begin work in the territory, promises military protection if necessary, and predicts that the non-Mormon population of Utah will increase rapidly as a result of mining interests and other opportunities in the region. A transcription of Connor’s letter follows:<sup>13</sup>

**HEAD-QUARTERS DISTRICT OF UTAH,**  
Camp Douglas, Utah Territory,  
Near Great Salt Lake City  
October 25<sup>t</sup> 1864

Rev J Blanchard  
Pres’t Wheaton College  
Wheaton, Ill’s.

Dear Sir.

Your favor of the 6<sup>t</sup> inst. Making inquiry concerning the Gentile population of G S Lake City and the practicability of Establishing an orthodox church therein, has been received.—In response I have to say that the present Gentile population of Salt Lake City numbers, perhaps, from four to five hundred,

<sup>10</sup>Jonathan Blanchard to Milton Badger, 10 October 1864, AHMS Collection.

<sup>11</sup>*Deseret News*, 29 October 1862; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 172.

<sup>12</sup>General Connor is quoted from Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, p. 174.

<sup>13</sup>Brigadier General Patrick E. Connor to Jonathan Blanchard, 25 October 1864, AHMS Collection. I have maintained Connor’s spelling and punctuation, including where he has crossed out words and where he has written capital letters over small ones.



including many families. This class is increasing Very rapidly; and without being too Sanguine, I feel justified in Saying that in another twelve months the permanent ~~G~~entile population will number not less than two thousand. Already a large portion of the business community is composed of ~~G~~entiles, and the country and trade being opened up here, in the heart of the Continent, are attracting hither Capital. Enterprise and ability — The development of the Silver Mines in near proximity to the City, is progressing with wonderful energy and rapidity; and there is now adjoining the mines in Rush Valley, a town of no less than forty comfortable houses already erected. Most of these are tenanted by families, who are almost Exclusively Gentiles. The great want, however, which has long been sorely felt by the Gentiles in this Territory, has been and still is an orthodox Christian Ministry. Now, they have no place to attend on the Sabbath, for public worship, nor are the restraining and humanizing influences of the Christian religion thrown around the Community. To me it has long been a Source of no little Surprise that, while the Several denominations of the church Send their

missionaries to the “<sup>parts</sup>uttermost ~~bounds~~ of the earth”, to redeem mankind, it has never been Seriously thought that here, between Either Verge of the great Continent, is to be found the grandest field for Missionary labor. — Leaving out of View, Entirely, the wants and religious necessities of the Soldiers of this command, and ~~G~~entiles congregated here, the ~~M~~ormon people themselves have greater need of missionary labor than any other people or Community on the face of the Earth.” —

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“Without expressing ~~any~~ preference for any Sect or division of the Church, I would, in common with hundreds, soon to be augmented to thousands, of my fellow Citizens here, hail the coming of a “Man of God” to teach Christ and him Crucified in this community. —

~~In reference to the other point Suggested by you, I have to add,~~  
No ¶  
~~that~~ So long, at least, as the troops remain here, freedom of opinion and the Expression of it, in its broadest American Sense, will be protected, and a Church Could be Established here without any apprehension of interference from the Mormon authorities — I have every confidence, too, that an orthodox Minister would be Well Sustained in a pecuniary point of view; but with the organization for Missionary purposes, now so happily Extant throughout our country, this could, surely, be but a trifling point in the consideration of the question.” —

I have the honor to remain

Very Respectfully

Your Obt Servt —

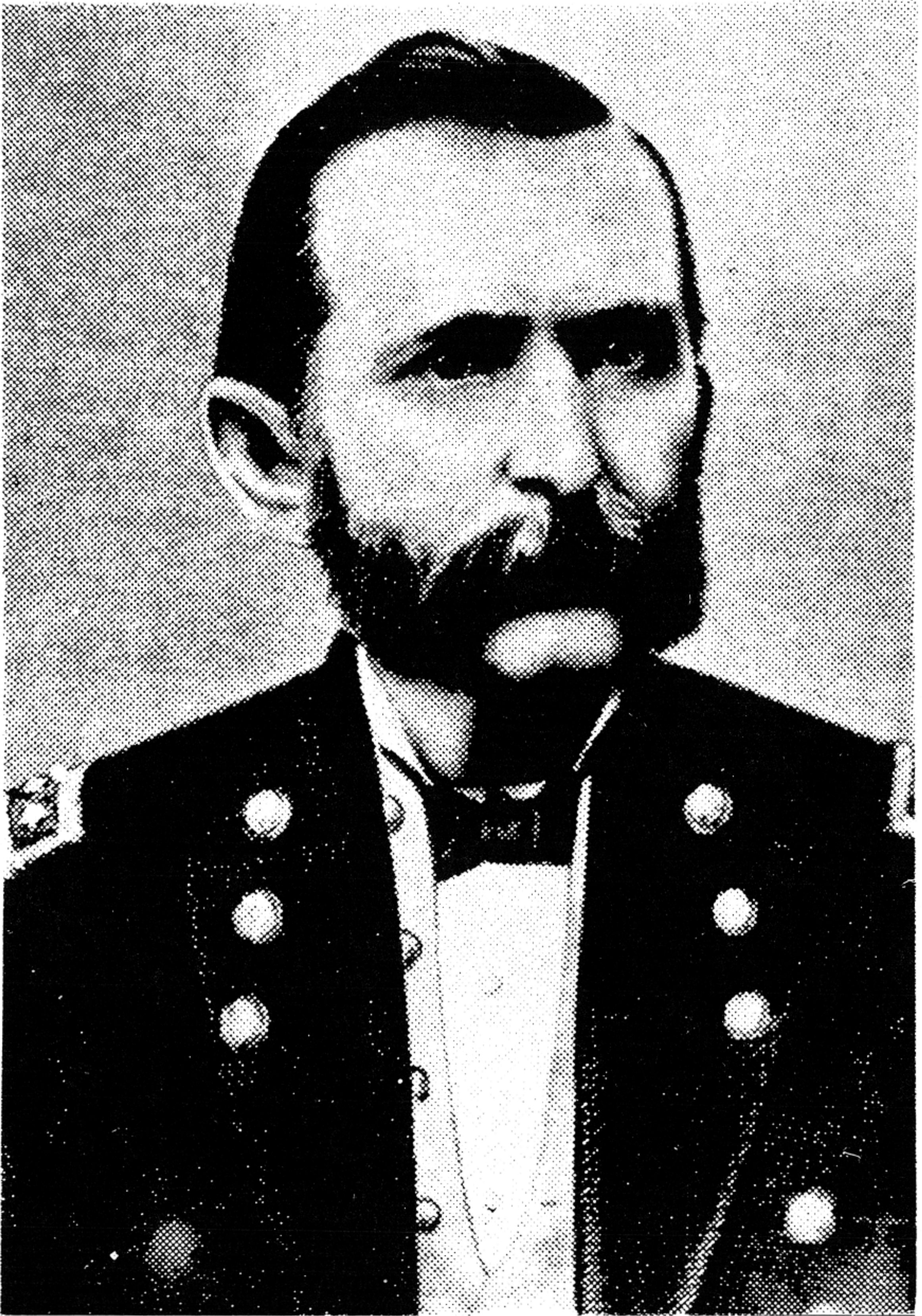
P. Edn. Connor

Brig. Genl. U.S. Vols.

Comdg Dist.

Although General Patrick Connor’s dreams of flooding the Salt Lake Valley with gentile settlers did not materialize, on the basis of





Brigadier General Patrick Edward Connor



his favorable report about prospects in Utah the AHMS sent Norman McLeod to Salt Lake City in early 1865, thus opening the first Congregational mission in the territory.<sup>14</sup> The Reverend McLeod immediately began sending to his New York supervisors picturesque descriptions of the Mormon kingdom. The first missionaries encountered some opposition from the Saints, and virtually every letter described an actual or perceived threat to the welfare of the mission. These men also reported on their general lack of success among the Mormons, on their efforts to maintain an operation in the Great Basin, and on political problems between the Saints and the Union.<sup>15</sup>

Numerous letters other than those in this article could be quoted. However, this note has only described the AHMS collection. It has introduced the contents of the collection by quoting two letters and excerpts from other letters that show the tenor of the collection's holdings about the Latter-day Saints. Much more remains to be done with this rich source of primary material. Its use could broaden the scope of Mormon scholarship beyond denominational studies, creating a more rounded portrait of the Church's history. The American Home Missionary Society collection is readily available at the Amistead Research Center, but it is also accessible on microfilm for those researchers who cannot travel to New Orleans. The microfilm collection containing 385 reels of 35mm film can be purchased from the Center along with a guide, briefly describing the holdings.<sup>16</sup> There is, unfortunately, no general index to the collection; however, a search of the state files listed previously should allow historians to focus on virtually all correspondence relating to the Mormons.

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<sup>14</sup>Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), pp. 201–2; and Horvath, *Guide to the Microfilm Edition*, pp. 40, 86.

<sup>15</sup>Norman McLeod to Milton Badger, 21 August 1865; and Jonathan Blanchard to Milton Badger, 11 February 1865, both in AHMS Collection.

<sup>16</sup>Horvath, *Guide to the Microfilm Edition*.