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Mormon Americana at Yale

George Miles

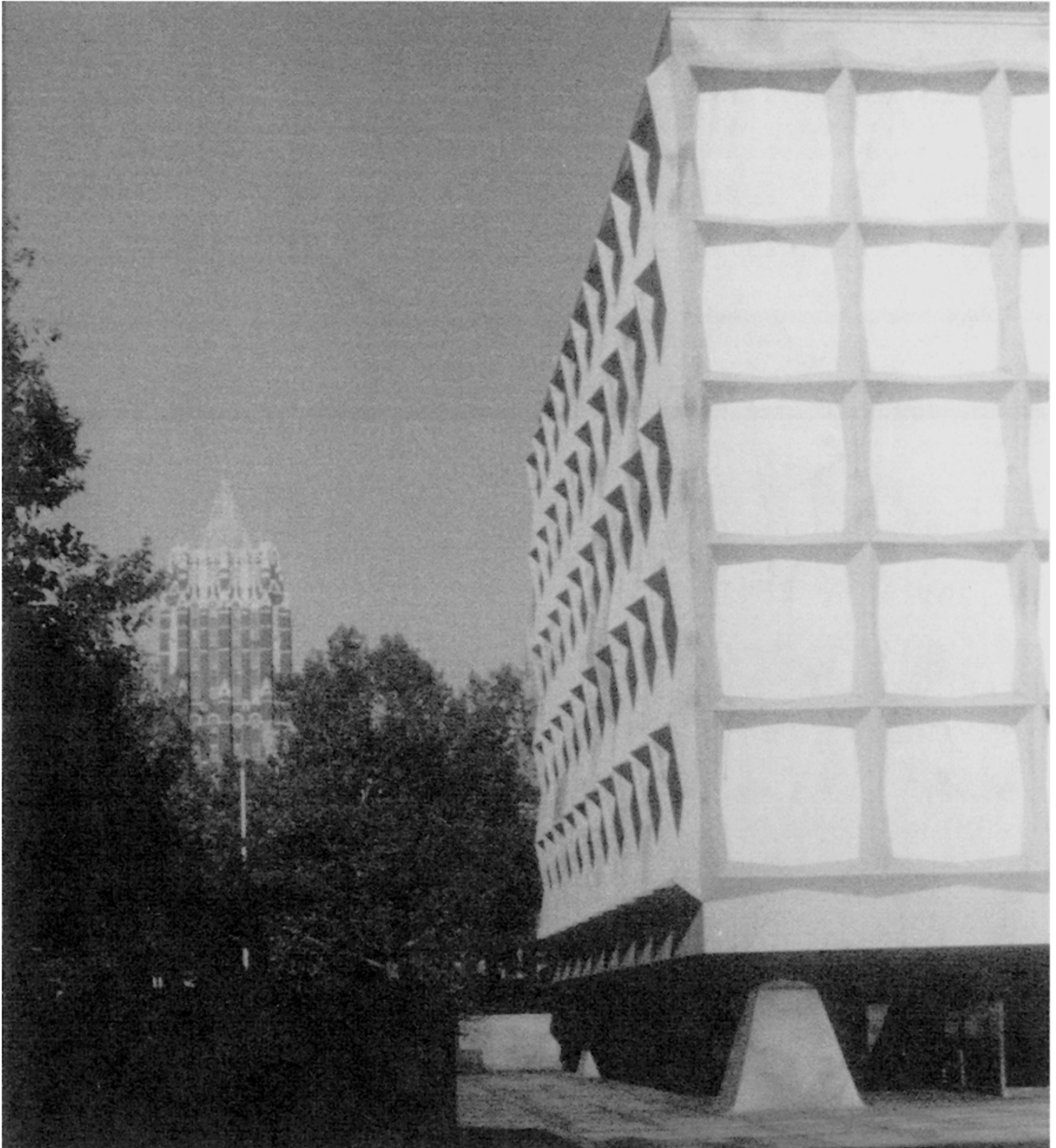
Yale's interest in Mormon Americana began in 1942 when William Robertson Coe presented the university with his personal collection of Western Americana. Between 1942 and 1949, Coe gave the Sterling Memorial Library over seven thousand items concerning the exploration, settlement, and development of the American West. Among the books, pamphlets, broadsides, manuscripts, and art in Coe's collection were more than nine hundred pieces concerning the early history of the Latter-day Saints. Since 1949 the Yale Collection of Western Americana, using endowment funds provided by Coe and other generous benefactors, has built an extensive collection documenting the origins and growth of Mormonism in the nineteenth century.

Yale's collection of Mormon Americana has grown rapidly since Coe's gift, but a discussion of his collection as a means of introducing Yale's seems appropriate for several reasons. Its creation represents a major chapter in the history of America's social and cultural response to Mormonism; that Coe and other collectors of his generation who were not members of the LDS Church found the documents and papers of early Mormonism interesting is, in itself, significant. Second, the recent profusion of forgeries and facsimile reproductions not only in Mormon Americana but also Texana and Early Americana, demonstrates the value of establishing the provenance of rare documents, even well-known ones. Finally, although Coe imposed no restrictions on Yale's future acquisitions of Mormon Americana, the composition of his collection has exerted important influences on them.

Coe began to collect Western Americana after his purchase in 1910 of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wyoming ranch. From the early 1920s through the 1930s, he relied heavily upon the assistance of

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The Beinecke Library at Yale University. The Yale Law School appears in the distance. (Courtesy of David J. Whittaker)

noted New York City antiquarian bookman Edward Eberstadt to build his collection. The origins of Western communities and institutions, the first exploration of an area, its initial settlement, and its earliest imprints intrigued Coe. He had less interest in tracking the development of frontier regions and none in documenting the post-frontier era. Consequently, his Mormon collection focused almost exclusively on the years between 1830 and 1870, from Joseph Smith's organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through the "Utah War" and its aftermath.

Coe's collection is especially distinguished in its coverage of Mormon history before the Saints' immigration to Utah. The collection contains first and later editions of major doctrinal works including the Book of Commandments (Independence, Mo., 1833), and the Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Latter-Day Saints (Kirtland, Ohio, 1835) as well as numerous editions of the Book of Mormon. Also well represented are pro- and anti-Mormon polemical writings, including Alexander Campbell's *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston, 1832), Charles Thompson's *Evidences in Proof of the Book of Mormon* (Batavia, 1841), and Oliver Cowdery's *Letters on the Origin of the Book of Mormon* (Liverpool, 1844).

Mormon efforts to establish a settlement in Missouri and the resistance Mormons encountered are thoroughly documented. William S. West's *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Rise and Pretensions of the Mormons* (Warren, 1837), Parley P. Pratt's *A Voice of Warning and Instruction* (New York, 1837; Nauvoo, 1844), John Greene's *Expulsion of the Mormons from the State of Missouri* (Cincinnati, 1839), John Corrill's *A Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Saint Louis, 1839), and Heber C. Kimball's *Journal* (Nauvoo, 1840) are a few of the many contemporaneous accounts in the collection. They are well complemented by lengthy runs of such important Mormon periodicals as the *Evening and the Morning Star* (Independence, Mo., 1832–33, and Kirtland, Ohio, 1834–35), the *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, 1834–37), and the *Elders' Journal of the Church of Latter-Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio, and Far West, Mo., 1837–38).

As the preceding discussion suggests, Coe was especially interested in printed accounts of Mormon history, but his collection also includes several valuable manuscripts describing Mormon life in Missouri and Illinois. Charles Coulson Rich's daybook describes

his journey from Tazewell County, Illinois, to Mormon Camp at Salt River, Missouri, in June 1834. William Law's daybook records his business accounts in Nauvoo in 1841 and 1842. James Monroe's diary and journal describe his conversion to Mormonism and his service as tutor to the children of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young in 1845. The collection's most extensive manuscripts concerning Nauvoo are the Oliver Olney papers. Olney became a Mormon in 1831 but was denounced by Joseph Smith in 1842. After the denunciation, from April 6, 1842, through January 23, 1843, Olney kept a virtual chronicle of life in Nauvoo. The perspective of a gentile trader familiar with Nauvoo is provided in James M. Sharpe's journal, written principally in 1843 and in September and October 1844.

The dramatic rise and fall of the Mormon community at Nauvoo is thoroughly recounted in complete sets of the *Times and Seasons* (Commerce and Nauvoo, Ill., 1839–46) and of the *Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star* (Manchester and Liverpool, 1841–1905). Numerous contemporary accounts document the assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith as well as the tumult which ensued between the Mormons and their neighbors. Newspapers like the *Nauvoo Neighbor* (Nauvoo, Ill., 1843–44), the *Prophet* (New York, 1844–45) and the *Messenger* (New York, 1845) provide valuable coverage of the events which by the spring of 1845 convinced Brigham Young and the Church elders to abandon Nauvoo. In the Coe collection is a manuscript letter dated April 25, 1845, written by "a Committee in behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints" to Massachusetts Governor George Briggs, which appeals for help and protection against the abuses the Mormons had suffered in Missouri and Illinois and for assistance in establishing an unmolested asylum in the far West. The letter, copies of which were simultaneously sent to the president and to the governors of every state except Missouri and Illinois, was the first public declaration of the Mormon hierarchy's intention to relocate beyond the settled regions of the United States.

The initial exodus of Mormons from Nauvoo to Winter Quarters (now Florence, Nebraska) and then to Salt Lake City is recorded in Howard Egan's journals. A major in the Nauvoo Legion and captain of the ninth group of ten during the trip from Winter Quarters to Salt Lake City in 1847, Egan returned east to repeat the trip with his family in 1848. His first journal covers the period from April 8 to July 27, 1847, when Brigham Young led the so-called

pioneer band from Winter Quarters to the Great Salt Lake. Egan describes the trip in detail, lists the members of the party, quotes Brigham Young's sermons, gives an inventory of provisions and provides a table of distances. Egan's second journal describes life at Salt Lake from July 28 through August 26 and then recounts his return journey to Winter Quarters as far as Pacific Springs. Egan's later journals as well as considerable material written by his son William Monroe Egan are also part of Coe's collection.

On December 23, 1847, after completing the initial trip to Salt Lake, Brigham Young released the first *General Epistle from the Council of the Twelve Apostles to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints throughout the Earth*, in which he described the enlistment of the Mormon Battalion, the establishment of Winter Quarters, the experiences of the pioneer band, and the founding of Salt Lake City. Coe was fortunate to acquire both the Saint Louis and Liverpool editions of this pivotal document of Mormon history as well as copies of William Clayton's *The Latter-Day Saints' Emigrants' Guide; Being a Table of Distances . . . from Council Bluffs to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (St. Louis, 1848). The collection also features a complete set of Orson Hyde's *Frontier Guardian* (Kanesville, Iowa [i.e. Council Bluffs], 1849–52). Published at an important jumping-off site on the overland trail, the paper was filled with information for and about Mormon emigrants.

Coe's collection documents in detail the early history of the Salt Lake community. *The Constitution of the State of Deseret* was printed in Kanesville as no local press suitable for the job had been established. On October 20, 1849, however, the first major publication from a press in Utah was issued. Brigham Young's *Second General Epistle of the Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints from the Great Salt Lake Valley to the Saints Scattered throughout the Earth* marked the inauguration of full-scale printing within the new settlement. Coe's collection features forty-five of the territory's earliest imprints including the *Ordinances Passed by the Legislative Council of Great Salt Lake City* (Great Salt Lake City, 1850), Brigham Young's *Third General Epistle . . .* (Great Salt Lake City, April 12, 1850), the *Governor's Message to the Senators and Representatives of the State of Deseret* (Great Salt Lake City, 1850), and the *First Annual Message of the Governor to the Legislative Assembly of Utah Territory* (Great Salt Lake City, 1851). Although

government-related printing predominated through the early 1850s, Utah presses soon began publishing on a broader range of topics. Brigham Young's *A Revelation on Celestial Marriage* (Great Salt Lake City, 1852), a series of issues of W. W. Phelps's *Deseret Almanac* beginning with 1852, and Belinda Pratt's *Defense of Polygamy* (Salt Lake City, 1854) are examples found in Coe's collection. In addition to Utah imprints and other materials published by the Mormons themselves,¹ Coe's collection contains numerous diaries, guide books, and memoirs by men and women who traveled through Salt Lake City on their way to Oregon, California, or other western destinations. Their observations provide important information not only about the social and economic development of Utah, but also about the continuing tension between the Latter-day Saints and other Americans.

Even as Mormon leaders struggled to establish a stable, permanent community in the United States, they began an aggressive, foreign missionary campaign. The world-wide scope of their efforts is reflected in Coe's collection in such pieces as Parley P. Pratt's *Proclamation! To the People of the Coasts and Islands of the Pacific* (Sydney, New South Wales, ca. 1851), his *Proclamation Extraordinary! To the Spanish Americans* (San Francisco, 1852), and Lorenzo Snow's *The Voice of Joseph* (Malta, 1852), as well as numerous nineteenth-century translations of the Book of Mormon. On a more prosaic level, the collection features an extensive set of Liverpool Mission imprints. Among the most spectacular is James Linforth and Frederick Piercy's pictorial work, *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley* (Liverpool, 1855).

The Mormons enjoyed great success in attracting converts, but the Church itself was rent by various schisms. Some dissenters split from Joseph Smith before his assassination, but after his death arguments about who should succeed to the leadership of the Church created further divisions. James Brewster's *The Words of Righteousness* (Springfield, Ill., 1845), *A Warning to the Latter-Day Saints* (Springfield, Ill., 1842), and *An Address to the Church of Latter-Day Saints* (Springfield, Ill., 1848), as well as Sidney Rigdon's *Disunion and Disfellowship with the Adherents of the Twelve* (Nauvoo, Ill., 1844) and Jason Brigg's *A Word of Consolation to the Scattered Saints* (Janesville, Wis., 1853), are among the important schismatic tracts in Coe's collection. One of the most charismatic and outspoken of

Brigham Young's opponents was James Jesse Strang, who claimed to have received a secret appointment by Joseph Smith as his successor. Coe acquired copies of most of Strang's published works as well as some two thousand pages of his correspondence and diaries, including the purported "letter of appointment" on which Strang based his claim.

Brigham Young had hoped to establish the Mormon Zion in an area sufficiently isolated from the principal settlements of the United States to insure its domestic tranquility. The discovery of gold in California shattered those hopes. By the mid-1850s, disputes between Mormon and gentile residents of Utah and between the Mormon hierarchy and the federal government escalated to the brink of war. As for the various topics discussed above, Coe's collection is replete with printed documents and accounts of the test of wills between President Buchanan and Governor Young. Present are Brigham Young's *Proclamation by the Governor* (Great Salt Lake City, September 15, 1857) declaring martial law, his *Governor's Message to the Legislative Assembly . . . December 15, 1857* (Great Salt Lake City), and one of the only two known copies of his *A Series of Instructions and Remarks at Special Council* (Great Salt Lake City, 1858), in which he suggests that the Saints prepare to flee rather than conduct open war against the federal government. Documenting the federal side are a complete file of the "War Department's General Orders of the Army" (New York, 1856–58), "General Orders of the Department of Utah" (Fort Leavenworth, Camp Scott, and Camp Floyd, 1857–59), and a series of pamphlets concerning overland freighting service supplied to the army by the firm of Majors, Russell, and Waddell.

Printed sources about the "Utah War" are complemented by several important manuscripts. Mormon preparations for war are described in "The Record of Orders, Returns, & Courts Martial &c of 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, Nauvoo Legion." Joseph Heger's portfolio of original pencil sketches of scenes in Utah provides a pictorial record of one federal cavalryman's experiences in the campaign. Most important, however, are Thomas L. Kane's papers and correspondence. Colonel Kane had become acquainted with Mormon leaders as early as 1846. In 1858, President Buchanan sent Kane to Utah as his special representative; Kane mediated a compromise between Presidents Buchanan and Young and helped

prevent a major war. His papers provide an invaluable perspective on the crisis and the Mormons' response to it.

Coe had relatively little interest in Mormon history after the Utah War. He did, however, acquire two important manuscript collections which document Mormon affairs in the 1860s. William Clayton's "Letter Press Copy Book" for February 1860 through April 1869 contains documents he executed as notary public of Great Salt Lake County, auditor of public accounts, and territorial recorder of marks and brands. One of the premier items in Coe's entire collection is a file of sixty letters from Brigham Young to William Hooper, Utah's territorial delegate to Congress. The letters, written between November 1859 and January 1869, describe events and conditions in Salt Lake City, gentile attitudes towards Utah, gold discoveries, and Indian affairs, as well as give family and Church news.

Concluding this discussion of Coe's collection, I need to mention that it includes numerous Mormon periodicals from around the world including a complete file of the first twenty-six volumes of the *Deseret News* (Great Salt Lake City, 1850–76).

Since 1949, Yale has added significantly to Coe's collection. Sterling Memorial Library, the university's central research collection, has assumed responsibility for acquiring modern scholarly studies, documentary editions, and other secondary material; the Collection of Western Americana, housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, acquires primary sources in their original format. In its acquisitions, the Western Americana collection has followed Coe's general interests, building upon the strengths of his gift. As did Coe, it has emphasized printed works rather than manuscripts; it has, however, broadened the chronological range of interest to include events and imprints of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus acquisitions reflect Yale's continuing interest in early Mormon imprints from Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and Utah; in the social and economic development of Utah; in doctrinal developments; in missionary activity in Britain, Scandinavia, and the Far East; and in the literature of the various schismatic sects. The collection has also continued to collect Mormon and anti-Mormon polemical tracts and periodical literature. In forty years, it has acquired more than fifteen hundred additional titles on virtually every aspect of early Mormon history.

To complement Coe's initial collection, Yale has sought to identify and acquire printed material concerning the doctrine, practice, and controversy of polygamy, as well as to develop holdings of privately printed reminiscences, memoirs, and local histories. Yale has been fortunate to acquire some great rarities in all areas, but its principal concern has been to build a comprehensive research collection in which scholars can investigate nearly any aspect of the Mormon experience in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To this end, considerable attention has been devoted to adding important albeit commonplace works.

For more information about Yale's collection of Mormon Americana, readers may consult Mary Withington, *A Catalog of Manuscripts in the Collection of Western Americana Formed by William Robertson Coe: Yale University Library* (New Haven, 1952); Edward Eberstadt, *The William Robertson Coe Collection of Western Americana* (New Haven, 1948); or the G. K. Hall Company's reproduction of the collection's catalogue (Boston, 1974). Since 1981 additions to the collection have been catalogued on the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). Inquiries about the collection, its hours, and photoduplication policies may be directed to The Yale Collection of Western Americana, Box 1603A Yale Station, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-1603.

NOTE

¹See the brief sketch by Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Note on Mormon Americana at Yale," *BYU Studies* 10 (Spring 1970): 386–88.