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Studying the Saints: Resources for Research in Mormon History at the Huntington Library

Peter J. Blodgett

When Henry Edwards Huntington retired in 1910 from a successful career in railroading and land development, he turned both his great fortune and his vast experience to the advancement of his fondest personal avocation, the collecting of rare books and manuscripts. Already well known for his accomplishments as a collector, he now applied himself with greater effort to this pursuit. By the time of his death in 1927, he had assembled one of the finest private holdings then in existence relating to Anglo-American history and literature. The research library established by Huntington on the foundation of that private collection has remained one of the preeminent resources for scholarship in America to this day. From the beginning, it has numbered significant documents of Mormon history among its many treasures.

The earliest Mormon acquisitions by Huntington resulted primarily from his enthusiasm for printed Americana and his decision to buy several large collections in their entirety. First and second editions of the Book of Mormon, for example, came to his library with the purchases of the E. Dwight Church and Augustin MacDonald collections in 1911 and 1916. The purchase in 1922 of Henry R. Wagner’s magnificent library of Western Americana capped this trend, adding seventy-eight volumes concerning Mormonism alone, such as a first edition of William Clayton’s renowned The Latter-Day Saints’ Emigrants’ Guide. By 1925, Huntington had already gathered a fine collection of printed Mormon titles, particularly focused upon the era of immigration to and settlement of Utah.

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Henry Edwards Huntington (1850–1927), the developer and book collector who devoted much of the last years of his life to gathering and preserving an extensive collection of manuscripts and rare books emphasizing American and English literature. In time his collecting embraced Western Americana, which included Mormons in the West. To house these collections, he built and endowed the library that bears his name. (Courtesy of the Huntington Library)
In subsequent years, that original collection of printed works grew enormously in breadth and depth, carefully nurtured by Leslie E. Bliss throughout his lengthy tenure as Huntington librarian. During the 1920s under Bliss’s administration, the library began to expand into the field of unpublished Mormon materials. That pursuit of original sources reinforced Huntington’s own interest in collecting the “background materials” necessary for scholarly research, however pedestrian such materials might seem to rare-book collectors. The background materials obtained for the field of western Americana included letters, diaries, journals, and reminiscences written by Latter-day Saints both famous and anonymous as well as by other observant commentators.

As early as 1929, the library added significant groups of Mormon manuscripts to its collections of original historical documents. Although not pursued initially with the vigor seen in later years, the acquisition of Mormon manuscripts began with several notable triumphs. In 1929, for instance, the Huntington obtained a series of six original diaries kept by John D. Lee, spanning a period from 1846 to 1876, as well as assorted Lee correspondence and an original diary from Rachel Woolsey Lee for the years 1856–60. The papers of Jacob S. Boreman, prominent opponent of the LDS Church and presiding judge at the two trials of John D. Lee, were acquired in 1934. And in 1942, as the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration was winding down its operations, the Huntington secured carbon copies of various pioneer reminiscences and histories as well as original historical ephemera brought together by Hugh O’Neil, an editor with the WPA Historic Records Survey in Utah.

Measured merely by these three acquisitions, the library had thus gathered a small but important collection of Mormon manuscripts that touched upon the end of the crucial Nauvoo period, the transcontinental flight to Utah, the colonization of the Great Basin, and the bitter conflict between Gentiles and Mormons in late nineteenth-century Utah.

By 1942, of course, the United States had joined World War II, and most of the nation’s energies were absorbed by the escalating war effort. At the time, it must have seemed that the preservation of the past would have to give way to the urgent demands of the present. Yet, at that very moment, a series of coincidental events were about to occur that would thrust the Huntington Library into the forefront of those institutions collecting Mormon historical materials.
The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California
(Courtesy of the Huntington Library)
The first link in that chain of events was forged in 1943 when Robert Glass Cleland, professor of history at Occidental College, became affiliated with the Huntington's research staff. Cleland, a renowned expert in the history of California and the Southwest, sought ways to promote further research in Southwestern history at the library. Aware of the financial support being given to the study of regional history by the Rockefeller Foundation, Cleland prodded the library into applying for a foundation grant. The foundation's humanities program responded in August 1944 with the offer of an annual award of $10,000 a year for a five-year term, to support fellowships, research grants, and the acquisition of both original documents and reproductions of those materials not available for purchase. Under the direction of an advisory committee headed by Cleland, a Southwest studies program took shape at the Huntington and began to attract a distinguished community of scholars to San Marino.

Cleland and the Rockefeller grant gave the library the impetus and the wherewithal to collect original source materials of Southwestern history. The Huntington's librarian, Leslie Bliss, faced the challenge of insuring that the funds devoted each year to acquisitions were well spent. Bliss himself had a well-deserved reputation as an able collector and an intelligent student of Western Americana, but collecting on the scale envisioned by the grant suggested the need for a full-time field representative. Thus did the Rockefeller grant serve its most important (if unintended) function by triggering the long and fruitful collaboration between the Huntington Library and Juanita Brooks.

Levi Peterson's recent biography of Juanita Brooks tells us much about this relationship. The basic details, however, can be recounted quickly. Brooks had first come into contact with the Huntington in 1944, when she had learned of the library's John D. Lee diaries. She visited the library at the invitation of Robert Cleland to consult them for her book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. After the Huntington had received the Rockefeller grant, Brooks received one of the research fellowships in Southwestern history to continue her work. Apparently impressed with the caliber of her research and with her personal contacts in the Southwest, Bliss also hired her under the auspices of the grant as a field agent to collect manuscript material on the region's history. Through the remainder of the 1940s and into the 1950s, Brooks scoured Utah and northern
Juanita Brooks (1898–1989), the diligent field agent for the Huntington Library during the 1940s and early 1950s. Brooks was instrumental in bringing many southern Utah and northern Arizona Mormon collections to the library.
Arizona for diaries, journals, letters, and reminiscences that would illuminate the settlement and the growth of the Great Basin area. In particular, she focused upon the southern portions of Utah known as Dixie and, during her labors, harvested an enormous crop of original records that were either acquired outright by the library or copied and then returned to the owners. The grant’s renewal in 1951 and Brooks’s personal friendship with Leslie Bliss kept her active as a field agent well into the 1950s.

Juanita Brooks’s notable success as a field agent made the post-war decade a golden era for the acquisition of Mormon historical documents at the Huntington. The accomplishments of the next two decades under Bliss’s direction in that field, although somewhat more modest in scope, maintained the momentum of previous years. Besides a continuing influx of individual diaries, journals, and autobiographies received from Brooks and other sources in Utah, several large and significant individual collections were added to the library’s holdings. The 1959 acquisition of the papers of Frederic E. Lockley, Jr., Oregon historian, editor, and rare-book dealer, included various letters written by his father, the editor of the *Salt Lake City Tribune* from 1873 to 1875. The senior Lockley’s correspondence commented on many aspects of Mormonism as well as on the 1875 trial of John D. Lee, which Lockley attended. In 1965 the Huntington received another collection dealing with a controversial phase of Mormon history when it obtained the original transcripts of Kimball Young’s interviews for his examination of polygamy, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?* A year later, the Huntington purchased a group of letters and documents concerning the business affairs of Lewis C. Bidamon, Illinois businessman and second husband of Emma Hale Smith, widow of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Inspection of that collection revealed that it contained papers of Emma Smith Bidamon and her son Joseph Smith, eventual leader of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Finally, in the field of printed matter, Bliss achieved his greatest coup with his successful pursuit of the Loughran Collection in 1962. The 15,000 books, pamphlets, and periodicals that comprised it represented an enormous treasure trove of rare Mormon documents that vastly expanded the library’s holdings.

As the 1960s closed, the Huntington could look back on three extraordinarily productive decades of collecting historical Mormon materials. Since then, the pace has slowed but the library continues
to make significant additions to both the printed and manuscript collections. The purchase or reproduction of Mormon family diaries and journals has continued, sometimes with the assistance of Brooks or other Mormon scholars, while fugitive copies of important printed texts have been tracked down through dealers and private collectors. In recent years, the library has acquired several valuable new pieces. A very rare 1845 broadside printed in Nauvoo announces the imminent departure of the Mormons from that beleaguered city. A run of Zion’s Watchman (Sydney, Australia) from its inauguration in 1853 through May 1856 includes the announcement to the Australian Saints of the doctrine of plural marriage. And, from a later period of Mormon history, the manuscript autobiography of Almeda Perry Brown captures in detail the life story of a twentieth-century Mormon woman who overcame great obstacles to become a prominent member of Utah State University’s faculty at an important stage in its development.

Such a brief sketch can hardly do justice to the intricate history behind the Huntington Library’s Mormon collection. It may convey, however, some sense of the great breadth of resources assembled over the last sixty years. But if the mere size of this collection commands our attention, do its contents merit the scholar’s interest?

In the field of printed works alone, the library’s accumulated holdings represent an exceptionally useful resource for scholars in many fields. Among the foundation texts of the Mormon faith, the Huntington’s Rare Books Department possesses over 100 English-language editions of the Book of Mormon, another 40 editions in eighteen separate languages, and examples of editions produced by other groups such as the Brookites and Whitmerites. Supplementing those many texts are first editions of the Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Kirtland, Ohio, 1835), the Pearl of Great Price (Liverpool, 1851) and Parley P. Pratt’s A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People (New York, 1837), as well as many subsequent printings in the United States and, in the case of A Voice of Warning, from overseas as well. Other volumes in the collection include most of the salient writings authored by early Church leaders.³

Over time, the library’s collecting also brought together an extensive file of newspapers and periodicals documenting the Church’s first half-century. Especially of note are complete runs of the Evening and the Morning Star in both its original publication
between 1832 and 1834 and its 1835–1836 Kirtland, Ohio, reissue; the *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio, 1834–37); and the *Elders' Journal of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio, and Far West, Mo., 1837–38). Other publications inform readers about events during the Nauvoo years (*Times and Seasons*, vols. 1–6, 1839–46), about the course of the Church's foreign mission endeavors (*Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star*, Liverpool, 1840–98), and about the initial settlement of the Great Basin (*Deseret News*, vols. 1–12, 1850–63 and scattered issues from later periods). The Huntington's microfilm collection reinforces our holdings of the *Deseret News* in particular with a copy of the weekly paper from 1850 through 1898 and the daily paper from volume 1, no. 1 through volume 4, no. 124 (November 21, 1867, through April 15, 1871).

Lastly, in its holdings the Huntington also numbers a great many of the major printed works about the Church. Since Huntington's time, the library has acquired a great assortment of volumes attacking, defending, or merely commenting upon Mormonism. Readers may discover the reminiscences of faithful Church members and bitter apostates, doctrinal works elaborating upon the structures of belief within the Church, the observations of such fascinated travelers as Sir Richard Burton, and the vast popular literature including dramas and dime novels that used Mormonism as the backdrop to adventure.

Equally close study of the Huntington's Mormon manuscript holdings reveals similarly impressive breadth and depth. The separate collections previously mentioned such as the Bidamon, the Boreman, and the Lee papers and such individual treasures as an 1834–38 Oliver Cowdery letterbook and two volumes of diaries kept by Eliza Roxcy Snow for the years 1846 to 1849 constitute by themselves a splendid array of original documents on the Mormon experience.

The heart of the matter, however, remains the Mormon File, a synthetic arrangement of manuscripts containing approximately 120 reels of microfilm, 160 bound photostats and typescripts, and over 1200 discrete letters and documents, assembled in large part under the sponsorship of the Rockefeller Foundation forty years ago. Taken in toto, this file now encompasses every phase of Mormon history from the era of the Prophet, through the exodus and the gathering of Zion, to the colonization of the intermountain region.
and the evolution of modern Utah. While it would be impossible to comment here upon the contents of every manuscript, let me offer several examples of the collection’s strengths. Mormonism’s early evolution and the Church’s combative relations with its gentile neighbors, for instance, especially in the state of Missouri, can be followed through a number of sources. Besides Oliver Cowdery’s letterbook, the Huntington possesses original transcripts of the court suits filed in 1833 by Edward Partridge and William W. Phelps in Jackson County, Missouri, against the men who tarred and feathered Partridge and looted Phelps’s home in Independence; a microfilm copy of David Lewis’s account of the Haun’s Mill massacre; and Reed Peck’s 1839 manuscript sketch of Mormonism’s Missouri period.

With the sesquicentennial of the British mission in mind, it should be noted that the Mormon File includes over thirty-five diaries and journals of Mormon missionaries in foreign lands. Most, of course, portray mission work in the British Isles or Scandinavia, but a few describe the search for converts in such distant locations as South Africa, India, New Zealand, Samoa, and the Sandwich Islands. Even those diaries kept by missionaries in the United Kingdom, although concentrating upon the same general subject, reproduce the experiences of many dedicated Saints over a five-decade span.

Other documents in the Mormon File capture all the steps in the process of gathering the faithful, including the drafts of converts raised by the foreign missions, and then dispersing them across the Great Basin Zion to hold it for God’s chosen people. We can follow many emigrants through their diaries and autobiographies on their difficult passage from European ports or the Eastern states to Utah and realize that despite the helping hand extended by the Church through such mechanisms as the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF), such a journey required great reserves of strength and courage. The papers of one PEF agent in Missouri, William Young Empey, outline the Fund’s operations for the 1854 travel season, capturing with unintended pathos the tribulations that might befall the emigrants. In a letter of April 24, 1854, written from the port of Liverpool, Samuel W. Richards, head of the British mission, chided Empey for failing to notify him of those emigrants in the parties Richards had sent out who had died in passage. The lack of news, he sternly reminded Empey, “leaves their friends in this country in terrible suspense.” And among Empey’s papers are several notebooks
containing lists of PEF and 13 & Co. passengers that record the names of those who succumbed.

At the end of that long voyage to the promised land, many of the Saints soon found themselves called upon to abandon their new homes and lay the cornerstones of new settlements in many different parts of the Great Basin. Within the Mormon File, researchers can find many diaries, journals, and other papers that picture the Mormon colonization of the Southwest. There are over twenty journals, diaries, and autobiographies, as well as several collections of personal papers, that describe colony-building in Nevada, Arizona, and the southern reaches of Utah. The Edwin Bunker Collection includes many personal and business papers that highlight efforts to establish the United Order in Bunkerville, Nevada, between 1877 and 1879 as well as Bunker's many responsibilities as a Mormon bishop in Bunkerville during the 1880s, responsibilities which ranged from collecting tithes and making distributions to the poor to laying down rules that governed the conduct of dancing parties. The United Order is also the subject of Emma Seegmiller Higbee's account of life at Orderville, "Voices from Within." Efforts to advance the economic development of the region can be followed through the Huntington's Frederick Kesler Collection, which includes nearly sixty volumes of daybooks and account books discussing the various mills that Kesler, a skilled practical engineer, built or operated all over the territory between 1857 and 1894.

On these and many other topics, Mormon collections at the Huntington offer considerable scope for scholarly investigation. The complex phenomenon that is Mormonism, however, did not live in a vacuum and should not be studied in one. The Huntington also offers scholars access to a uniquely rich array of collateral materials that establishes the essential context of Mormonism's place in Western history. The library's superb collection of overland journals, for example, furnishes a massive amount of information about the trans-Mississippi West and about westward migration, especially during the height of the California Gold Rush. Some of these manuscripts record the passage of their authors through the new Mormon commonwealth; as a group, they describe the hopes and aspirations of western immigrants as well as the experience of overland migration. The Huntington's recent acquisition of Professor Ralph P. Bieber's research archive deepens its resources concerning western migration and settlement. Bieber accumulated an enormous
collection of newspaper transcriptions in the course of a long career spent studying the great rush to California in 1849–50 and the development of the American Southwest. Thousands of handwritten notecards or photostatic copies were made from hundreds of newspapers in every state and many territories, documenting the overland trek to California, the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, the Mexican War, the organization of the western range-cattle industry, and the establishment of overland trade and communications with California after statehood. Another set of newspaper transcriptions compiled by another leading Western historian gathers together information on the topic “Mormons and the Far West.” Dale Morgan drew upon newspapers in every state between 1809 and 1857 to reproduce hundreds of articles that might be useful to historians of Mormonism. His assiduous research, like that of Bieber, saved from near-permanent obscurity hundreds of sources residing in private hands or in anonymous local historical collections. Lastly, the Huntington has acquired for its reference collection hundreds of biographical dictionaries, state and county histories, city directories, and microfilm copies of territorial records from the federal government pertaining to Utah and several of its neighbors. These references help provide the substratum of facts necessary for much historical research.

Without attempting, therefore, to produce a detailed handlist that enumerates every item in the Huntington’s collections, this essay has sought to describe the general contours of the collection and to highlight some of its particular strengths. The individual pieces and specific collections cited here represent only a small portion of the whole. Confronted by this vast assortment of materials, what can contemporary students of Mormonism and of Western American history learn from it as they conduct their research? And how can access to it at the Huntington be improved?

Clearly the importance of the Huntington’s Mormon holdings, especially its numerous diaries, journals, and autobiographies, is as great, if not greater, to Western history than ever before. The growing sophistication of many regional historians, influenced by new techniques of social and cultural analysis, have encouraged a mounting interest in the documentary records kept by the relatively anonymous. Desirous of portraying society “from the bottom up,” many historians now seek to understand how individuals shaped and in turn were shaped by the systems of belief or the social
organizations of their times. For Mormon history, these manuscripts provide a great reservoir of details about all aspects of daily life in many Mormon communities from the perspectives of men and women, immigrants and old-stock Americans, farmers and town dwellers, recent converts and second-generation believers. For the social history of the American West, these manuscripts chronicle the settlement and development of a large portion of the Great Basin zone, often in minute detail. Scholars researching questions in these fields should find a number of productive sources at hand. They may even have the opportunity to delve into some of the diaries, journals, autobiographies, or life sketches that escaped inclusion in Davis Bitton’s splendid Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies.

Bitton’s guide remains an absolutely essential road map with which to plot the course of one’s research in Mormon diaries and autobiographies. Over time, however, as cataloguing of the Huntington’s Mormon manuscripts has continued, a number of original and facsimile items not known to Bitton have surfaced. Among these manuscripts are various accounts of foreign missions, including the holograph missionary journals of Andrew Henry in Ireland during 1842 and 1843, Ira Hinckley in New Zealand during 1882 and 1883, and Edwin T. Wooley in England during 1884, as well as microfilm copies of William Fotheringham’s mission journals from India, China, and South Africa in 1854–55 and 1861–62. Other original or reproduced manuscripts that were not listed in Bitton include life sketches of Sariah Louisa Chamberlain, Margaret Miller Watson De Witt, Lorin Farr, George Elmer Gardner, Silas Harris, Heber Jarvis, Zadoc Judd, Mons Larson, James Richey, George Thomas Rogers, George H. Rothrock, August Maria Outzan Smith, Janet Mauretta Johnson Smith, and Barry Wride; autobiographies of Asahel Woodruff Burk, Joan Walker Fotheringham, John Addison Hunt, James W. Le Sueur, Sophrania Moore Martin, Samuel Miles, Lemuel Harrison Redd, and William Henry Streeper; and reminiscences of Thomas Day, Anna Maria Hafen, and Mary Minerva Judd. Also worthy of note in the Mormon File are journals kept by Elias H. Blackburn (1904–1905), Harriet Bunting (1885–90), Prime Thornton Coleman (1879–1930), Joab Collier (1874–75 and 1889), William Farrer (1849–54), James Holt (1841–53), Sarah Sturdevant Leavitt (1874–75), Knud Swensen (1857–1902), Dana O. Walton (1890–1901), and Edwin Thomas Wooley (1884–86 and 1900–1906), as well as diaries written by James G. Bleak (1873), J. R. Bodham (1886),

Unfortunately, the substantial number of relatively untapped sources within our collection points up the existence of certain problems that have hampered efficient use of our Mormon manuscripts in the past, stemming in large part from the sheer bulk of the Mormon File and from the manner in which it was gathered. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, as original and facsimile copies of Mormon manuscripts poured into the library through the efforts of Juanita Brooks and others, the number of acquisitions taxed the resources of the institution to accession and organize them rapidly enough to remain current with new acquisitions at a time when large additions were being made to the holdings in other fields. Although no detailed records exist discussing the library’s plans for the Mormon File, it seems likely that the file was created as a temporary expedient to absorb all the Mormon manuscripts in a common grouping.

The author card file established to inventory all these manuscripts served for a number of years with some success as the primary finding aid for the Mormon file. The card file’s structure, however, has always imposed intractable limits upon its utility. The only bibliographic data common to each card has been the author’s name. If the initial precataloguing examination failed to reveal the inclusive dates or descriptive information about the subjects discussed in the manuscript, then such information was omitted, under the assumption that the collection would soon be receiving more systematic attention. For the same reason, almost no subject indexing was done on these texts. Many items were not even assigned call numbers since it was expected that the entire file would be reorganized. Today, the lack of call numbers slows down the process of locating and retrieving these manuscripts for readers and for photo reproduction orders. The lack of chronological detail and of subject indexing makes it very difficult for researchers to identify sources containing information on specific topics unless they have prepared a list of relevant individuals whose names can be cross-checked against our card index. Under some circumstances, therefore, the Mormon File can be a cumbersome tool to use.
Despite all these difficulties, many historians have drawn upon the rich resources of the Huntington’s collections. We expect that this trend will only increase. Therefore, the library has embarked on a long-term project to remedy the existing problems with the Mormon File. An item-by-item review of its contents will produce necessary bibliographic information about each piece, including, in the case of reproductions, details about the original manuscript that will enable scholars, through comparison with guides such as Bitton’s, to verify whether they are reading an exact copy of an original or a variation. Standardized cataloguing will be accompanied by indexing of the most significant subjects in the card catalogue under Library of Congress subject headings. Eventually, this review will result in a full, printed inventory of all Mormon items and, perhaps, a computerized data base for the Mormon File that could be updated routinely.

The Huntington’s relationship with the history of Mormons and Mormonism has been a long and successful one. Since its founding, the library has assembled a collection of Mormon materials with few parallels outside of Utah. It has hosted several generations of scholars, who have authored many fine historical or biographical studies. The projected reorganization of the Mormon File, now in the preliminary stages, will enhance the file’s accessibility to readers at the Huntington and improve the library’s ability to assist serious advanced research in Mormon history for many years to come.

Researchers seeking more information about manuscripts mentioned in this essay or about other portions of the library’s Mormon holdings are encouraged to inquire of the Department of Manuscripts, the Department of Rare Books, or the Reader Services Department, Huntington Library, 1151 Oxford Road, San Marino, California 91108. Since the library is not a public institution, researchers should also contact the Department of Reader Services for further information about guidelines for admission and applications for reading privileges.
NOTES


4 For more information about the history of the library, see John E. Pomfret, The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery: From Its Beginnings to 1969 (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1969); The Founding of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, which was the August 1969 issue of The Huntington Library Quarterly, vol. 32, no. 4; and Selena A. Spurgeon, Henry Edwards Huntington, His Life and His Collections, a Docent Guide (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1992), especially chapter 6, "The Library."