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The Historians' Corner

Ronald W. Walker and David J. Whittaker

This Historians' Corner deals with Brigham Young—the man who dominated Mormonism from Joseph Smith's death in 1844 until his own demise thirty-three years later. He was a complex man, and biographers have struggled to capture his variety.

The two Brigham Young documents printed here for the first time in their entirety emphasize this point. The first is a three-and-a-half page letter that Young wrote to his wife, Mary Ann Angel, just months before the portentous events of June 1844. The letter is full of Young's interests and activity. He frets about his never too robust health. He mentions his religious feeling and expresses concern about his home and friends ("there is no place like home to me"). While an ardent and devoted missionary, Elder Young's preaching zeal clearly did not supplant his tenderness for hearth and companions.

Brigham Young wrote this letter while he was in the East raising money for Nauvoo's public buildings and trying to encourage emigration to what was then the LDS Church's capital. His letter conveys these goals as well as his larger Mormon faith. But what seems especially interesting are the kinds of things that delight him: bathing in a discrete place on the Coney Island beach, spending a few days fraternizing with Mormon sympathizer James Arlington Bennet, preaching to the Saints in novel ways to make them understand the will of the Lord, or observing, with his typical enthusiasm for detail, Philadelphia's Fairmount Waterworks. He was an animated, physical man, who liked useful things.

He was more. The second letter tells of Young's spiritual dimension. It is addressed to Elder Hiram McKee, a Methodist lay

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minister, who was then living in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin. Thirty years earlier, Young and McKee were neighbors in Oswego, New York, where the two were close spiritual allies as each searched for a satisfying faith. “How sweet was our communion in old Oswego,” McKee remembered, “how encouraging our prayers, and enlivening our Songs, when we used to sing.” The future Mormon leader gave McKee “advise, counsel, [and] prayers” and showed “deep piety” and “faith.”¹

The intervening years separated the two men not only by time and miles, but also by religious profession. Young moved to Mendon, New York, and converted to Mormonism. During one of his first missions for his new church, he sought out and attempted to convert McKee, who by this time was living in Sackets Harbor, New York. Young’s preaching left McKee unconvinced, and the two parted, firmly disagreeing.

Now, after the lapse of so many years, McKee wondered about Young’s spiritual state. The Methodist had followed his former friend’s career in the national press, and what he read deeply disturbed him. “Disclosure after disclosure” seemed to indicate Young’s need for repentance. As Brigham Young had once helped McKee in his “dark hour of sin,” perhaps he, McKee, could now help his old friend.² In April 1860, McKee wrote Young inviting him to do penance.

McKee’s letter summoned the response from President Young that is reproduced here. In his reply, the Mormon leader not only defended his character and career, but spoke revealingly about how he, as a Mormon convert of almost thirty years, had come to see himself. He remained a sincere, believing Christian, he assured McKee, whose religious faith had grown—not ebbed—with the passing years. Indeed, President Young believed that Mormonism had given him the strength to endure the slander that swirled so violently around him.

The matter did not end here. Additional letters passed between the two men that suggest McKee probably accepted Young’s invitation to visit Salt Lake City.³ While their religious disagreements likely continued, we can hope the two old religious seekers renewed and even strengthened the ties of their youth.