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James B. Allen

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"Turning Over Stones"—The Value of Primary Sources

The three items in this issue of The Historians Corner are all different subject matter, but their presentation as a group is connected with one central theme: the importance of going to original sources in our continual quest for historical knowledge.

A prominent historian once remarked that the historian's experience is something like that of an outdoorsman who loves hiking in the mountains but instead of just looking at the scenery, he turns over the stones. All sorts of new and interesting things suddenly emerge from under them. And so it is that as we ply through the little-used diaries, letters, and other papers of the past, a little time spent in examination, turning them over so to speak, often results in some unexpected and even exciting finds. What's more, these new discoveries are often more than just interesting curiosities, for sometimes even a small one adds important depth to our understanding of some past event.

Three cases in point. For many years Mormon scholars have been aware of the political Kingdom of God concept which characterized the thinking and planning of Mormon leaders over 100 years ago, but who has ever supposed that they went so far as to design a flag, or flags, for it? Michael Quinn has discovered three possible flags, and in the process, added a new phase to our knowledge of the Kingdom. In his description of the Stephen Post collection, Max Evans points out for us a rich field of research where many new stones may be turned. And David Williams, while doing research completely unconnected with Mormon history, discovered the
original of an interesting letter which throws important light on the background of anti-Mormon sentiment in the 1850s.