How Hofmann Forged The Oath of a Freeman

Mark Hofmann’s confessions about his forging of Mormon documents and The Oath of a Freeman have clarified a great many things about his modus operandi and make fascinating reading. Among other things, for example, we learn that he used a carpenter’s C-clamp to make the copy of the Oath that he tried to sell for $1,500,000. The man would have been positively dangerous if he had had access to a printing press!

The facts have come out in a 600-page transcript of an interrogation of Hofmann by his former prosecutors. His frank answers to this interrogation were a condition of his plea bargain, which saved him from the death penalty for the murder by bombs of two people in Salt Lake City.

Hofmann forged written and printed documents, especially Mormon documents, and sold them at very high prices. By and large they do not seem to have been challenged by the experts. A factor in the acceptance of the Mormon documents was that the most expensive items were often sold to members of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Since the documents were often at variance with the accepted Mormon version of things, they were usually hidden away in vaults and not subjected to critical scrutiny. Not so with The Oath of a Freeman, however.

Early in 1985, with a series of successful high-priced fakes behind him already, Hofmann began to think about something even bigger. He knew that no copy of the Freeman’s Oath was recorded, although it is known to be the first thing printed on the Stephen Daye press in Cambridge in late 1638 or early 1639, and its full text was reprinted within a few years of that date. Like T.J. Wise’s fakes of non-existent first editions of Victorian poets, it was an ideal situation for a forger because there was no authentic copy of the original to compare with the forgery. But where Wise was content with modest profits spread out over many years, Hofmann was ready to take a far riskier course, although he knew that The Oath of a Freeman would be subjected to the most intense scrutiny with the most advanced scientific techniques.

Hofmann knew that copies of the earliest extant printing in the English colonies, The Bay Psalm Book, sold for over a million dollars, and only eleven copies are in existence.

“I felt it would be damn valuable. Yes, I had a good idea of what The Bay Psalm Book was selling for . . . my belief was that it would be more valuable than The Bay Psalm Book.”

Hofmann drew on his experience in creating other faked documents to produce the Oath. He proceeded along the lines suggested in APHA Newsletter 70 in March, 1986. He obtained a copy of a facsimile edition of The Bay Psalm Book. (Editions were published in 1903 and in 1956.) Hofmann studied the printed facsimile as well as microfilms of various copies of the book in the University of Utah Library.

“It was a simple matter of Xerographic from the facsimile of The Bay Psalm Book several . . . of the pages which I wanted to copy . . . this is the page of the 39th Psalm and it has the same typeface as what I used in creating the border.”

It is gratifying that we hit the nail on the head on that one. Quoting from the APHA Newsletter 69 (March, 1986):

“The fleurons used to form the border of the oaths are smaller than those on the title page of the Bay Psalm Book, but match those used to introduce the separate Books of the Psalms. Only a single pair of fleurons in the psalm book exactly match the way the pairs were made up to form the border of the oaths; the rest show other configurations. The matching pair are in the opening of the Fourth Book of the
Lake City. DeBouzek made a negative of the paste-up and from that a photo-engraved letterpress plate. When Hofmann came to pick up the plate, the bill was $47 and he only had $45 in cash on him. He wrote a check for the difference, signed it “Mike Harris,” and thus linked himself to the crime.

When he had his relief plate at home, he used “iron wool” (steel wool?) to round the corners of the letters. He used a fine abrasive stone in an electric drill to grind down the edges of some letters. “This was the first attempt by the Daye print shop to make an impression, and if it was crude or didn’t look quite right, I didn’t think it would be too great of a concern.” He was right; the Library of Congress experts who examined the result could find nothing inconsistent with a 17th-century origin.

Finally, he rolled the ink on to the plate, and laid over it his stolen paper backed with a piece of felt and a thick copper plate – and made the impression using a carpenter’s C-clamp! It is hard to believe, but his first attempt was successful, and this copy was the one offered to the world as the first printing in North America.

Hofmann wrote the words “Oathe of a Freeman” on the back of the paper, knowing that the writing would also be tested and having confidence in his proven ability to fake old writing. He aged the writing ink with ammonia or an ozone treatment.

In March of 1985 Hofmann turned over his forgery to the unsuspecting principals of Schiller-Wapner Galleries in New York. He owed them a lot of money on previous transactions, and the sale of the Oath would help square accounts. He retained the printing plate in his home and used it about October 8th to make another copy of the Oath, after which he burned it.

The method of providing a false receipt from the Argosy Book Store in New York has been described in Newsletter 72, and involved planting a print with the title “The Oath of a Freeman” on it and purchasing it from the bookstore, making sure that the title was noted on the receipt.

The subsequent history of this 4” x 6” scrap of paper is generally known. Schiller-Wapner loaned it to the Library of Congress, where it passed all tests regarding text, paper, ink, and chemistry. But it was returned by the LC because of the enormous asking price of $1.5 million and because of doubts about provenance. As a frequenter of the Argosy Book Store, I too would be suspicious if I ran across a copy of the Freeman’s Oath – but I keep hoping.

The fake then went to the American Antiquarian Society, where it was under serious consideration at a much-reduced price of $250,000. It has been reported that it was to have been voted on at the AAS on the same day that the first of Hofmann’s bombs went off in Salt Lake City.

This C-clamp-printed scrap of paper has been subjected to every known test and not failed any of them. Even ion bombardment tests of the ink, performed at the Crocker Nuclear Laboratory at the University of California, Davis, were inconclusive. One nationally-known expert claimed that the ink and paper appeared to have been bonded together “for the past 300+ years.” Perhaps the experience of The Oath of a Freeman may result in better tests, and will thus be of service in the search for truth.

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Golding Pearl Press 7x11 Old Style, No. 3, in good operating condition, complete except for missing the two wooden drawers in the base. For sale by Joe Nicola, Sr., 313 South LBJ Drive, San Marcos, TX 78667-0665; tel. 512-392-3951.

Bookbinders' Supplies The Bookbinder's Warehouse, Inc., 45 Division St., Keyport, NJ 07735 (tel. 201-264-0306) has taken over the distribution of leathers from Hewit's Tannery of Scotland. A wide variety of leathers and binding supplies for hand binding are available. For information, write or phone.

The following slate has been presented by the Nominating Committee of APHA, for terms beginning in January, 1988:
For President: James Green
Vice-President, Publications: Jeffrey Kalnawitz
Vice-President, Programs: John Lancaster
Vice-President, Membership: Edward Colker
Treasurer: E.H. Pat Taylor
Secretary: Michael Hentges
Trustee (to 1991): Barbara Paulson
Martin Hutner
Calvin Otto
Trustee (to 1990): Virginia Smith

The Nominating Committee consisted of Morris Gelfand (Chair.), Joan Friedman, Elizabeth Harris, John Hench, and Abe Lerner.

Executive Secretary APHA's Board has approved a new, paid position, that of Executive Secretary. Renée Weber, the Editor of Printing History, has been appointed to the position. Among her new responsibilities will be maintaining the APHA membership list, handling membership inquires, processing orders for back issues of our publications and our mailing list, etc. She can be contacted at the

The APHA Newsletter is published six times yearly by the American Printing History Association. All letters, news items and other material for the Newsletter should be sent directly to the Editor: Stephen O. Saxe, 1100 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10028. Subscriptions are through membership in APHA, and include all publications. Personal memberships for the calendar year are $20; $25 for U.S. institutions. Membership and other correspondence should be sent to APHA, P.O. Box 4922, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Copyright © 1987 by the American Printing History Association. All rights reserved.

APHA mailing address (see box) or directly at the following address:
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Special Collections
Fairleigh Dickinson University Library
Madison, N.J. 07904

Annual Meeting APHA's annual meeting will take place on Jan. 30, 1988 in the Trustees' Room of the New York Public Library. At that time the APHA Annual Awards will be presented; they have not yet been announced.

APHA Conference The 12th Annual Conference was held on September 26th at Columbia University, on the subject of Government Printing in the Western Hemisphere. The program, arranged by David Heisser of Tufts University, included speakers Norman Manchevsky, Queen's Printer for Canada; Sarah Jordan Miller, Rutgers; Laurence Hallwell, University of Minnesota; James M. Bruns, Smithsonian Institution; and Gay Walker, Yale University.

Philadelphia Conference The 13th Annual Conference will be outside New York for the first time. The program will take place in Philadelphia next September and will be held in conjunction with a grand exhibition of treasures from eleven Philadelphia libraries. The program, which is being arranged by James Green of The Library Company, Philadelphia, is on the subject of The Book Arts in Philadelphia, 1790-1890. Speakers so far include Edwin Wolf, 2nd, Kenneth Finkel and William Spawn. The program will be held at the Philadelphia Historical Society and will be followed by an afternoon reception at The Library Company.


With the arrival of “desk-top publishing,” there are a lot of people setting type and designing publications who have no idea at all of the history and background of typography and printing, and even less of typesetting and design. Thirty Centuries of Graphic Design is meant for them, and I hope that it reaches every one of them - quickly. This attractively designed and knowledgeably written book is the equivalent of a college survey course. It is intended to give to the beginner a wide-ranging, basic knowledge of the entire field. It succeeds admirably.
Clearly and succinctly written by James Craig and APHA member Bruce Barton, it covers every major event and development in graphic arts history, beginning with the Cro-Magnon Man at about 30,000 B.C. It hardly need be mentioned that covering everything in 224 pages means that nothing is described in depth. That is not the purpose of this book. It whets the appetite, provides a starting-point for further reading.

The 400 illustrations are well-chosen and nicely printed on good paper. Photographs of printed works intermingle with maps, works of art from each period, pictures of presses and other related objects. For each time period, a succinct list of cultural events is given, which may help the historically hazy current generation of designers to orient themselves in time. The list mixes art and industry:

- 1851 Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* not well received.
- Isaac Singer manufactures first practical sewing machine.
- Verdi composes *Rigoletto*.

There are also useful alphabetical lists of designers, writers, composers, etc. at the end of each section, with their dates.

Although not intended as a design manual, the book may well function in that capacity by simply showing the best graphic design of every epoch. This book will probably end up in a lot of graphic designers’ Christmas stockings and it may be the only history-oriented book in their possession. It is a very welcome as a straightforward, uncomplicated, but responsible, presentation of the development of the graphic arts.

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**BRIEFLY NOTED**

**Chicago Treasures** To mark the 10th anniversary of The Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, the Library’s Special Collections Division will present a major exhibition of treasures gathered by the Library during its 115-year history. The exhibition will be on display from October 8 through January 30, 1988 in the G.A.R. Memorial Museum, 78 Washington Street. Among the items on exhibit will be incunabula, historic books, broadsides and photographs of Chicago, and Civil War artifacts. In connection with the exhibition there will be a program of seven talks on aspects of collecting for the public. For information about the talks, phone 312-269-2926.

**Matheson Retires** William Matheson, chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Divisions of the Library of Congress, retired on August 28 after 19 years of service at the LC. He became chief of the Rare Book Division in 1972. During his years in that post he directed the transfer of the Lessing J. Rosenwald collection to the LC. Mr. Matheson is a long-time member of APHA.

**Ticknor Imprints** Bromer Booksellers of Boston has announced the sale of the John William Pye Collection of Ticknor & Fields imprints to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The collection includes over 3000 books from the noted 19th-century Boston publisher, printed between 1830 and 1880. It includes first editions of many noted New England writers, including Thoreau, Hawthorne, Emerson, Holmes, Stowe, and Longfellow.

**Doc Leslie Memorial** *Newsletter* 78 erred in saying that the May 29th memorial program for Dr. Bob Leslie was arranged by Herb Johnson. The program was actually arranged by a committee consisting of George Laws, Alice Koeth, Michael Hentges, Carl Schlesinger and Catherine Brody. Herb Johnson conducted the program and produced a 10-minute videotape on Doc Leslie for the memorial.

**Goudy Award** The annual Frederic W. Goudy Award will be presented on November 6 to Charles Bigelow. Mr. Bigelow is a well-known type designer and is professor of digital typeography at Stanford University. His achievement has been the merging of the history and aesthetics of traditional type design with modern computer technology.

**DePol Exhibition** Mills College, Oakland CA, will hold an exhibition of wood engravings by the noted engraver John DePol. The exhibit, scheduled for November and December, will feature prints and illustrated books, along with woodblocks and tools. DePol will give an evening lecture on making wood engravings on November 19th, with a reception following, and will hold a workshop for students (open to the public) on November 21 and 22. For details call Mills College at 415-430-3302.