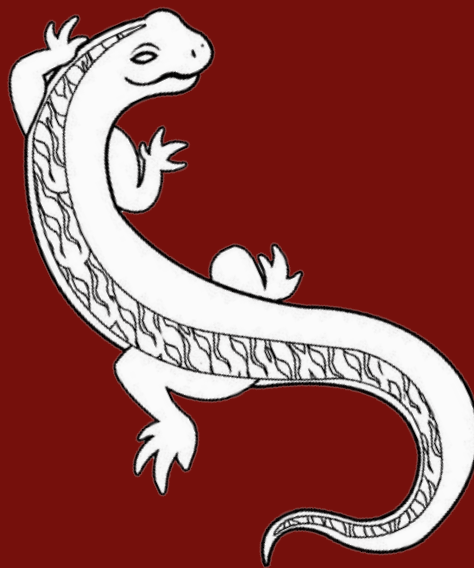


Sample

# Tracking the White Salamander



**The Story of Mark Hofmann, Murder  
and Forged Mormon Documents**

**By Jerald Tanner**

*Includes Confessions of a White Salamander and  
The Mormon Church and the McLellin Collection*

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**By Jerald Tanner**

**Third Edition**

**ALSO**

***Includes Confessions of a White Salamander and  
The Mormon Church and the McLellin Collection***

**Utah Lighthouse Ministry**

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## 1. THE SALAMANDER MURDERS

*“At face value,” I wrote that evening in my journal, “it is explosive. It is a letter from Martin Harris to W. W. Phelps . . . describing the early origins of the Church in spiritualistic or cabalistic terms.” (Professor Ronald W. Walker, Brigham Young University Studies, vol. 24, no. 4, page 461)*

*But of course you do not believe in the Salamander, or the green snake. (The Best Tales of Hoffmann, page 57)*

As I left the Salt Lake City Post Office on October 15, 1985, I noticed that the east side of Main Street was blocked off by the police. Later I was to learn that a murder had been committed at the Judge Building—less than a block from where I obtained my mail. Steven F. Christensen, a Mormon bishop, had picked up a box in front of his office which turned out to be a “booby-trapped shrapnel bomb.” The *Deseret News*, April 15, 1986, reported:

In testimony Monday, an insurance representative [Janet McDermott] with an office directly across from Christensen’s office testified the force of the bomb blast knocked plaster off the walls of her office and sent glass flying. . . . she immediately ran behind her desk, fearing someone in the hallway had just been shot and that a gunman was in the hallway. “I crouched down,” she said, “I didn’t know what was going on.”

McDermott heard, not the sound of a gunman in the hall, but a “very high pitched crying—like a little child dying,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

She walked out into the hall and found Christensen lying half in, half out of his office doorway. His chest was bloody. The crying noises she had heard were coming from Christensen, but they were much deeper now.

The amount of gun powder used in the pipe bomb together with the nails which were taped around the outside of the pipe insured that Christensen would not survive the blast.

“He was obviously dead,” said Battalion Chief Lamont Epperson, Salt Lake City Fire Department. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, October 16, 1985)

It soon became apparent that the victim was the same man who bought the notorious “White Salamander Letter”—a letter which proved to be embarrassing to the Mormon Church.

Later that morning another package exploded killing Kathleen Sheets. This package was addressed to her husband, J. Gary Sheets who was also a bishop in the Mormon Church. Mr. Sheets “had helped fund research that authenticated the [Salamander] letter” (Ibid.). Since my wife, Sandra, and I had been the first ones to print extracts from the Salamander letter, we became somewhat concerned about our safety. The next day a bomb exploded in a car less than two miles from our house. Mark Hofmann, who sold the Salamander letter to Mr. Christensen, was critically injured in this blast. By this time we began to seriously consider the possibility that there was a systematic conspiracy to wipe out those who were bringing out information which was embarrassing to the Mormon Church. Because of our connection with the Salamander letter we were deluged with phone calls from the news media and others who were concerned about our safety or just wanted to find out what was going on in Salt Lake City. The next day (October 17) the *Deseret News* reported a surprising development: “. . . police say Hofmann is considered not just a third victim but also a prime suspect in the Tuesday killings, and others may be involved as well.”

Although Mr. Hofmann’s defense attorney later announced that Hofmann passed a lie detector test concerning the bombings, he has never allowed police to conduct such a test or even to question his client. While Mark Hofmann was in the hospital recovering from the blast, he said that he wanted to talk to the police. It was felt by police that he was going to make a confession. Detective Jim Bell testified at Hofmann’s preliminary hearing that he “received a call from my sergeant . . . that Hofmann wanted to confess.” Before detectives were able to listen to Hofmann’s statements, however, his attorney arrived and convinced him not to talk about the bombings. While police called Mark Hofmann the

“prime suspect” in the case, no murder charges were filed against him in 1985. A federal grand jury did indict Mr. Hofmann “on one count of possession of an unregistered Action Arms Ltd. Uzi machine gun” (*Salt Lake Tribune*, November 7), but Hofmann pleaded “not guilty.” This charge is not related to the bombings but came from evidence gathered in the investigation which followed.

In the *Salt Lake City Messenger* for January 1986, we reported that Mormon document dealer Mark Hofmann was not only a suspect in the October 15th Salt Lake City bombing’s case but that police were also investigating the possibility that Mr. Hofmann had been selling forged documents to the Mormon Church. On February 4, 1986, a statement was released to the news media which contained this information:

The Salt Lake City Police Department, the Salt Lake County Sheriff’s Department and the Salt Lake County Attorney’s Office today announced the culmination of a three-and-a-half-month investigation into the bombing deaths of Steven F. Christensen and Kathleen W. Sheets.

Mark W. Hofmann has been charged with two counts of first-degree homicide, a capital offense, and 26 other counts.

In the formal complaint, (*The State of Utah, Plaintiff, v. Mark W. Hofmann, . . .*), Mr. Hofmann was accused of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from Mormon Church leaders and other unsuspecting individuals through the sale of forged or nonexistent documents. On April 5, 1986, the *Deseret News* reported that Mark Hofmann “was charged Friday with an additional four counts of theft by deception stemming from several transactions, some of which involved early Utah currency and a promissory note from Jim Bridger.” Before Hofmann was officially charged with the crimes (i.e., prior to February 4, 1986), some of his supporters believed that his lawyers would call for a preliminary hearing to be held within ten days and that the charges would be dismissed. This all turned out to be wishful-thinking.

In April 1986 a preliminary hearing began for Mark Hofmann which lasted into May and was called “the most complex and lengthy preliminary hearing in Utah history” (*Salt Lake Tribune*, May 13, 1986). On May 22, 1986, Judge Paul G. Grant decided that Mark Hofmann should be bound over for trial. In a statement issued by the Court, Judge Grant stated:

After a review of each of the 30 alleged counts in the five Informations before the court and the careful evaluation of all of the evidence admitted in these matters

IT IS THE FINDING of the Court that there is probable cause to believe that all the crimes have been committed and there is probable cause to believe that the defendant committed each of the crimes as alleged.

## ULM’S INVESTIGATION

Nineteen months before local and federal investigators began working on the Salt Lake bombing’s case, Utah Lighthouse Ministry began its own investigation concerning the authenticity of the documents Mark Hofmann was selling the Mormon Church and other collectors. In this inquiry we obtained information from Washington, D.C. and ten different states. We even interviewed a convicted murderer at the Utah State Prison.

Our investigation began in March 1984 just after we were given extracts from the so-called Salamander letter. Sandra and I had been acquainted with Mark Hofmann for a number of years before he “discovered” this controversial letter. The first recollection I have of actually meeting Mr. Hofmann was in 1980. Recently I learned, however, that he may have been in our bookstore on June 16, 1978. On that day a young man came in and showed Sandra a copy of the Second Anointing—a highly secret ritual which was frequently performed in the early Mormon temples but is seldom even mentioned today. He claimed it had belonged to his grandfather and had come down through the family. Stamped at the top of the paper were the words “SALT LAKE TEMPLE,” and next to this was a handwritten notation which read: “Destroy this copy.” The man said he felt we should have a photocopy of it. He stressed that his family would be very unhappy if they thought that he was turning it over to us and he claimed that he did not dare reveal his name to us because he belonged to a very prominent Mormon family. Sandra thought that this man was somewhat thinner than Mark Hofmann is today and also that his hair was lighter. Nevertheless, she remembers that he would probably have been about the age that Hofmann was at that time.

In talking with a writer who was doing research concerning Mr. Hofmann’s activities, I learned that investigators were looking into a document concerning the Second Anointing ceremony which A. J. Simmonds had purchased from Mark Hofmann. Mr. Simmonds was kind enough to send me a photocopy of the document and I compared it to the copy that had been given to Sandra. I found that the two were identical. Simmonds revealed that he bought the document from Hofmann for \$60 in October 1979—over a year after Sandra was given the photocopy. If Mr. Simmond’s recollection

## SALT LAKE TEMPLE

Dear Bro. :— having the authority of God,  
I pour this holy anointing oil upon your head, & anoint you  
a King & a priest unto the Most High God to rule  
& reign in the House of Israel forever.

I bestow upon you all of the rights, blessings, &  
authorities appertaining unto the Holy Priesthood for the  
building up of the Kingdom of God on earth.

By virtue of this anointing I seal you up unto  
eternal life wherein nothing but the unpardonable sin  
of shedding innocent blood or consenting thereto by  
denying the Holy Spirit may deprive you of this  
promise & blessing. Thou shalt be exalted in the  
Celestial Kingdom of God & shall dwell with  
the patriarchal <sup>family</sup> order of God for ever.

With this exaltation I ordain you an  
equal in the order of the everlasting priesthood  
with the gods, & all the holy angels your  
fellows. Your kingdom & power & glory shall have  
no end. Your righteous seed shall be from everlasting  
to everlasting & shall continually sing praises unto  
you world without end.

All of this I lawfully do, by right of the  
Holy Priesthood, in the name of the Father & of  
the Son & of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

is correct, Mr. Hofmann must have been the one who brought the document to Sandra. Simmonds seemed to recall that Hofmann told him at the time that he had already given a copy of the document to the Tanners.

Investigators are apparently skeptical concerning the authenticity of the document. The fact that the words "SALT LAKE TEMPLE" are stamped at the top causes me to doubt its validity because Hofmann used rubber stamps in some of his other forgeries. However this may be, Mr. Hofmann's plan seems to have been to obtain publicity for the document by getting us to publish it. If this were the case, he must have been disappointed. Since we had no pedigree for the document and didn't even know the name of the person who gave it to us, we did not feel safe to use it in any of our publications. Except for a few copies we gave to scholars who were interested, it has remained in our files since 1978. One can only speculate on what might have happened if we had taken the bait. Perhaps Mr. Hofmann would have used us as a publisher for his documents. As it turned out, however, the Mormon leaders became the ones who broke the news concerning most of his important "discoveries" at press conferences which they held. As Hofmann became more involved in dealing with the Church, he naturally would have been worried that Church leaders would find out that he had sold some of the secret temple ritual to Mr. Simmonds. This information could have had a very bad effect on his document business with the Church. I have been told that he begged Simmonds not to reveal his part in the transaction.

As I have indicated earlier, I first became acquainted with Mark Hofmann in 1980. Just after he discovered the Anthon transcript (a sheet of paper which is supposed to contain the actual characters Joseph Smith copied from the gold plates of the Book of Mormon), Mr. Hofmann came to our store and discussed the discovery. Although he had served as a Mormon missionary in England, it soon became evident that he did not fully trust the Mormon leaders. He said, in fact, that he was suspicious that the Church might be bugging his phone. He did not claim, however, to have any real evidence about the matter. At that first meeting I had a minor disagreement with Mark Hofmann. I had photographically reproduced a xerox copy of the Anthon transcript and Mr. Hofmann felt that I should have consulted with him before publication. He believed that he had some manuscript rights in the document and that no one could reproduce it without his permission. I informed him, however, that merely possessing a document does not give a person any special manuscript rights and that anyone could reproduce it without his permission.

In spite of this disagreement, Mr. Hofmann was very polite. Sometime later he came back to the store and said that he had done research on the matter and found that my statements were correct. He referred to the lawsuit that Andrew Ehat had filed against me and Sandra for copyright violation when we reproduced portions of the William Clayton journals. He indicated that he felt Mr. Ehat had no manuscript rights and was really off base in bringing a lawsuit. (This lawsuit was finally dismissed by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit.)

In the years that followed our first meeting Mr. Hofmann would occasionally visit our bookstore and tell of the remarkable discoveries that he was making. In the latter part of November 1983 I first heard that Mark Hofmann had a letter which was supposed to have been written by Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris. It was dated October 23, 1830, and was addressed to W. W. Phelps. When I learned of the contents of the letter, I realized that it could deal a devastating blow to the Mormon Church. Sandra and I had previously written a book entitled, *Mormonism, Magic and Masonry*. In this book we presented strong evidence that Joseph Smith was involved in money-digging and magic. Martin Harris' letter seemed to provide new and exciting evidence which supported our thesis. This letter is known as the Salamander letter because Martin Harris was supposed to have written that Joseph Smith claimed when he went to get the gold plates for the Book of Mormon, a "white salamander" in the bottom of the hole "transfigured himself" into a "spirit" and "struck me 3 times."

Fortunately, I was able to obtain some revealing extracts from the letter and was preparing to print them in the March 1984 issue of the *Messenger*. I was very excited that we at Utah Lighthouse Ministry would be the first to break this important story to the world. While in the midst of compiling evidence to support the authenticity of the Salamander letter, I made a discovery that shook me to the very core. I found that the account of the transformation of the white salamander into the spirit was remarkably similar to a statement E. D. Howe published in *Mormonism Unveiled*. This book, written four years after the date which appears in the Harris letter, told of a toad "which immediately transformed itself into a spirit" and struck Joseph Smith. Even more disconcerting, however, was the fact that other remarkable parallels to the Salamander letter were found just two or three pages from the account of the transformation of the toad into a spirit (see *Mormonism Unveiled*, pages 273, 275 and 276).

Some years before I had encountered similar evidence of plagiarism in Joseph Smith's *History of*

End of sample pages.  
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