

Reflections on Discovering the "Lost Mormon Cave"

by KC Kern | Sep 22, 2015 | Book of Mormon, Church History, Featured, History, Joseph Smith, Mormonism | 6 comments





Introduction

Earlier this month, my friend Greg Pavone and I lead an initiative to locate and excavate a cave located in Miner's Hill, in Manchester New York. This project was the culmination of over a year's worth of exploring, research, and coordination. After a great deal of hard work, tenacity, and a few strokes of good fortune, we finally found the time to meet back up in New York, and were successful in finding and unearthing the cave. It was truly a remarkable and unforgettable experience.

According to some sources, the cave we found was manually dug into the hill by Joseph Smith and/or his father in the early 1820s, and may have been the setting for some of the Book of Mormon's pre-publication activities. The full story of regarding the discovery, digging, history and religious significance of the cave can be read here: <http://archival.link/mormoncave/story>.

In this post, I discuss some personal reflections and thoughts relating to the experience.

Buried Treasure and Amateur Archaeology



"Archaeology is the search for fact ... not truth. If it's truth you're interested in, Dr. Tyree's philosophy class is right down the hall. So forget any ideas you've got about lost cities, exotic travel, and digging up the world. We do not follow maps to buried treasure, and "X" never, ever, marks the spot. Seventy percent of all archaeology is done in the library." —Indiana Jones

I have often felt like one of Dr. Jones' students in this scene. "X" doesn't mark the spot, there are no lost religious relics waiting to be reclaimed, and everything to be found has already been discovered, so I should just abandon all fantasies of romantic quests through the rabbit hole of history in hopes of discovering anything of historical value. Everything there is to be known about any subject is already neatly presented in a volume produced by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, HarperCollins, or CES.

But as Mark Twain once put it, "There comes a time in every rightly-constructed boy's life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure." (The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Chapter 25) As it was with Tom Sawyer, so it was with me. When I first learned of the possibility of a forgotten cave associated with early Mormon history, I felt an increasing sense of urgency to prove or disprove its existence once and for all. The fact that no one had gotten to it yet—but that someone might yet beat me to it—further motivated me to put some plans into action.

Greg Pavone, my faithful accomplice in all of this, was instrumental in lining up a of key contacts, in securing permissions, and in sustaining motivation and excitement throughout the process. We often reminded each other that a lot of people like to dream big and talk big, but putting plans into action was something else entirely. As I drove into Manchester NY, pulled up at the dig site, and listened to the diesel roar of our excavator, I heard the melody of "Raider's March" play through my mind.

As I swung the pickaxe and filled the wheelbarrow for hour after hour, I acquired a new-found respect for money-diggers. With sweat dripping off my brow and nose and streaming down my face, I realized this was really hard work. They earned every ounce of Spanish treasure they ever found. As I dug in the very spot that Joseph Smith carved out of a hill nearly 200 years ago (some accounts say it was Father Smith who did most of the digging), I felt an unexpected sense of solidarity with the Smiths. These were their stomping grounds. What events might have transpired here?



Treasure Guardians

While digging, we were met with a few unexpected onlookers. Some woodland creatures payed us a visit, notably, several toads, as well as a salamander. I thought of how common it would have been for 19th century money-diggers to encounter these types of creatures, and how they would have become incorporated into the mythology of a treasure quest.

"Eye of newt, and toe of frog," were some of the ingredients the witches' brew featured in Shakespeare's Macbeth (Act IV, i, 14). It would seem that little creatures have long been associated with mythical properties, featured alongside crystal balls and necromancers. Amphibians in particular may have been believed to possess spiritual attributes, given their ability to cross between terrestrial and aquatic realms, perhaps leading to an association with spiritual beings who



Toad seen at the dig site

appear on earth to deliver messages to mortals.

The concepts of mysterious treasure quests, crystal balls, and necromancy don't sit well in orthodox religious traditions, but Joseph Smith's



Salamander seen at the dig site

story about a lost golden book, seer stones, and interactions with a resurrected (ergo previously dead) personage overlay on that template with rather obvious parallels. Interestingly enough, some early retellings of Joseph's story include details about about toad-like form that served as some sort of spiritual conduit for the heavenly messenger who was steward of the golden plates. Smith family friend Benjamin Saunders explained in 1884:

"I heard Joe tell my Mother and Sister how he procured the plates. He said he was directed by an angel where it was. He went in the night to get the plates. When he took the plates there was **something down near the box that looked some like a toad** that rose up into a man which forbid him to take the plates...."^[1]

His retelling may have been influenced by a much earlier statement by a neighbor of the Smiths', Willard Chase, who in 1833 claimed that:

"He saw **in the box something like a toad**, which soon assumed the appearance of a man, and struck him on the side of his head."^[2]

Mark Hoffman's infamous "Salamander Letter" forgery that surfaced in the 1980s seems to be based off of these statements, only replacing the toad for a white salamander:

"..the old spirit come to me 3 times in the same dream & says dig up the gold but when I take it up the next morning the spirit transfigured himself from **a white salamander in the bottom of the hole** & struck me 3 times & held the treasure & would not let me have it ..."^[3]

While there is plenty of room to be skeptical about of the Saunders and Chase (and obviously the Hoffman) statements, there is clearly an indication of past generations linking encounters with amphibians to treasure digging and spiritual rendezvous. As we were greeted by toads and salamanders on *our* dig, we couldn't help but appreciate how well it fit in within our activities of unearthing Joseph Smith's long lost cave.

Making Sense of History

The image shows a grid of 18 small cards, each representing a historical source related to the 'Lost Mormon Cave'. Each card includes a year, a name, a small portrait or image, and a brief description of the source's content. The cards are arranged in a 6x3 grid. Below the grid is a caption: "A thorough collection of sources related to the cave".

1873 George Q. Cannon Brigham Young Jr. and George Q. Cannon learned from their father's carriage driver that "Mormon Hill" and "Gold Mine Hill" are in fact separate hills. "Mormon Hill" contains a cave. <i>—George Q. Cannon's History of the Latter-day Saints</i>	1878 David Whitmer The angel hid the sealed plates in a cave in New York, not in the Hill Cumorah, but nearby. <i>—The Book of Mormon: The Sacred Scriptures of the Latter-day Saints</i>	1874 Times Union Andrew Kimmer uncovered a 7th high 8th wide cave in Miner's Hill after children discovered the opening 13 years previously. <i>—The Times Union, 1874</i>
1874 Palmyra Courier Andrew Kimmer uncovered Miner's hill cave with a bulldozer, and installed metal bars. <i>—Palmyra Courier, 1874</i>	1841 NY Journal of Commerce Joseph Smith dug into the side of a hill, secluded himself for months, and pretended to find a new revelation. <i>—The New York Journal of Commerce, 1841</i>	1867 Pomeroy Tucker Joseph Smith sought divine favor and translated in a 360 ft artificial cave dug into a hill on Amos Miner's land. <i>—The Pomeroy Tucker, 1867</i>
1875 Charles W. Brown Kimmer dug a 60ft long, 10ft high, rough artificial cave into Miner's Hill, furnished it with an iron door, and furnished it with a table and stools to hold public meetings. <i>—The New York Journal of Commerce, 1875</i>	1876 Broomer Republican A reporter visited the cave after, some time, and in vain. Here Joseph Smith translated the plates with Oliver Cowdery. 30 people could fit inside. It was locked behind a glass door. <i>—The Broomer Republican, 1876</i>	1877 Brigham Young Joseph and Oliver walked into a cave in the Hill Cumorah and saw the plates on a table, along with many other plates and the sword of Laban. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1877</i>
1881 John Gilbert John Gilbert only saw Joseph a few times, but saw Oliver often. The Book of Mormon was translated in a cave. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1881</i>	1881 Erna Pierce Miss Chase has been in the cave where they found the plates, hidden not in "Mormon Hill," but about a mile from it. The cave is now filled in. Miss Pierce never told it. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1881</i>	1882 Ellen Dickinson Joseph Smith and his followers deciphered the golden plates in the cave on the Hill Cumorah. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1882</i>
1884 Samantha Payne Mormons dug a cave in Miner's Hill, and installed a door and padlock. Miss Payne broke in and found food and sheep pen inside. Local woman Samantha Payne visits the cave. Wallace Alder dug out silver in the cave. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1884</i>	1884 Lorenzo Saunders (via W.H. Kelley) Joseph Smith dug into a hill reportedly for money. Through his peep stone he saw a tribal king trapped in the hill, sitting on a gold furniture. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1884</i>	1884 Lorenzo Saunders (via E.L. Kelley) The cave is on the east side of the Hill. Lorenzo Saunders saw the Smiths dig a big hole, and later tore down the door and sealed up the cave at his father Joseph's order. <i>—The Book of Mormon, 1884</i>

A thorough collection of sources related to the cave

Prior to putting boots on the ground, I set out to collect a comprehensive database of sources related to the cave. To be included, a source must either mention Miner's hill cave specifically, speak of a cave related to Mormonism (many sources seem to place the cave in the Hill Cumorah), or contain an obscure or cryptic statement that might be relevant to understanding where the gold plates may have ended up.

While the exercise of collecting these sources was primarily one of "due diligence" and wanting to be fully informed about what has ever been said about the cave, it offered a few notable lessons.

First, I learned how difficult it is to "get to the bottom" of the story, even with a plentitude of sources. When sources disagree, who do you deem more credible? Those who have been "closest to the source"? The ones who support the version you want to be true? Assessing the reliability of a source is the task of trained historian, but even then, trained historians don't always agree on who to believe first and foremost. Old newspapers (and many authors of 19th century books) also seem to feel exempt from citing any sources or offering any pedigree to their information. "And you know this how?" was my frequent internal question as I pored through the surviving records and accounts that speak of the cave.

Next, while I like to give most sources (friendly and non-friendly) the benefit of the doubt, some accounts are simply obvious fabrications. One shady 1893 account from the Palmyra Journal tells a fanciful story about visiting the cave complete with details about an anonymous stranger who guided unwitting reporters into a journey through the bowels of the earth, only to meet a mysterious old man with the original gold plates within a cavernous enclosure. It contains echoes of previously published information, but seems to take great liberties in embellishing and expanding the story into something that, although it doubtlessly captured audience imagination, was far more fiction than fact. And so it was with many other sources. Retellings of retellings spiral into more and more elaborate stories, just as the proverbial fish grows a few inches each time the story is told.

Through it all, I gained an increased appreciation for the difficult task that historians face, and for

the ambiguity that arises from reading and parsing the raw historical record.

Spiritual and Religious Musings



"I think it's time to ask yourself; what do you believe in?" —Walter Donovan to Indiana Jones

My main objective in going into this project was to find the cave. If I could just stand up inside the cave, I would be satisfied. I got my wish. We found the cave. It was—as far as we could tell—empty.

Nevertheless, a good deal of the sources I found mention the cave in connection with the gold plates and/or the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon. What if we had found something? What the sealed portion or other records had turned up? What would we do with them? Donate them to the Smithsonian? Call on LDS Church leaders to translate them? Ask to borrow the seer stone? When considered in a concrete, here-and-now perspective, all of those options seem a bit silly.

Yet, is not the forthcoming discovery of records still a part of the LDS belief system, and an integral part of Mormon eschatology? Is that still a tenet we subscribe to and a doctrine we value? If so, what form might that type of discovery actually take? If not from a rediscovered long-lost cave dug by Mormonism's founder, then from where? Were we part of a greater plan to bring about divine purposes? Would we be joined by "a mighty one...in a cave...who shall do his work..." to "[translate] the plates, which are sealed"?

In 1980 Bruce R. McConkie taught:

We do not have the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon because we are not prepared to understand and live the truths found therein. [4]



Are we any more prepared now than we were 35 years ago? Or are we in a continual holding pattern, waiting for some unspecified cue? If the Lord is waiting on us to prepare, what does the preparation he is expecting look like? Is it taking more seriously that which have already received? Being more diligent in our efforts to live and preach the gospel?

While still covered in dirt, Greg and I stumbled into the Sacred Grove visitor's center. We were met by a kind senior missionary who asked if he could answer any questions. We asked him for six copies of the Book of Mormon. Surprised, he asked "to share?" We said yes, and he handed over six fresh copies with delight. We delivered each copy to the friends and neighbors we had met

along the way, including the man who had first tipped us off, as well as to the property owner, his family, and some of his friends. Our interactions with all of them were already very Mormon-themed, so offering the very book at the center of all our activities didn't seem the least bit out of place. They all accepted the book with not only interest, but excitement. It was like they were finally seeing what "all the fuss was about."

It was interesting to hear their perspectives on being Palmyra/Manchester locals and seeing the Mormons flock in for pageant each year. Many of them had either never seen the pageant, or had not been for decades, and they generally had very little interactions with Mormons at all. Due to church land purchases in recent decades, word in town is that "the Mormons are loaded." Yet despite their proximity to LDS folks and early Mormon locales, one neighbor was unaware that the tours of church history sites were free, none of the neighbors had ever seen a copy of the Book of Mormon, and another neighbor's knowledge about Joseph Smith was limited to the story that "he was a horse thief who was hanged." In light of all this, we were grateful that this little project gave us the access to a portion of the local community that heretofore had been unreached by the Church and the local ward's missionary efforts.

Next Steps

The whole experience, while very satisfying, felt somewhat anti-climactic. While I wasn't expecting anything (other than a cave) to turn up in the dig, I wondered with great excitement if something *might*. There is still more excavating to do. The cave floor might go several levels deeper than we reached. Picking up where we left off will require some funding, some interested parties, and some expertise. Is this where the story of the Lost Mormon Cave ends? Is there someone eager to run with the baton? Please direct all inquiries to mormoncave@gmail.com.

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1. Benjamin Saunders, Interviewed by William H. Kelley, circa September 1884, 19-30, "Miscellany," RLDS Church Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri.
 2. WILLARD CHASE STATEMENT, CIRCA 11 DEC 1833, 242
 3. Mark Hoffman's Salamander Letter
 4. Open letter, about 1980, Historical Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

127

2



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