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How a Mormon lawyer transformed archaeology in Mexico—and ended up losing his faith

By [Lizzie Wade](#) | Jan. 18, 2018, 10:45 AM

Thomas Stuart Ferguson lay in his hammock, certain that he had found the promised land. It had been raining for 5 hours in his camp in tropical Mexico on this late January evening in 1948, and his three campmates had long since drifted off to sleep. But Ferguson was vibrating with excitement. Eager to tell someone what he had seen, he dashed through the downpour to retrieve paper from his supply bag. Ensnared in his hammock's cocoon of mosquito netting, he clicked on his flashlight and began to write a letter home.

"We have discovered a very great city here in the heart of 'Bountiful' land," Ferguson wrote. According to the Book of Mormon, Bountiful was one of the first areas settled by the Nephites, ancient people who supposedly sailed from Israel to the Americas around 600 B.C.E. Centuries later, according to the scripture, Jesus appeared to the Nephites in the same region after his

resurrection. Mormons like Ferguson were certain that these events had happened in the ancient Americas, but debates raged over exactly how their sacred lands mapped onto real-world geography. The Book of Mormon gave only scattered clues, speaking of a narrow isthmus, a river called Sidon, and lands to the north and south occupied by the Nephites and their enemies, the Lamanites.

After years of studying maps, Mormon scripture, and Spanish chronicles, Ferguson had concluded that the Book of Mormon took place around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrowest part of Mexico. He had come to the jungles of Campeche, northeast of the isthmus, to find proof.

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As the group's local guide hacked a path through the undergrowth with his machete, that proof seemed to materialize before Ferguson's eyes. "We have explored four days and have found eight pyramids and many lesser structures and there are more at every turn," he wrote of the ruins he and his companions found on the western shore of Laguna de Términos. "Hundreds and possibly several thousand people must have lived here anciently. This site has never been explored before."



Thomas Stuart Ferguson

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Ferguson, a lawyer by training, did go on to open an important new window on Mesoamerica's past. His quest eventually spurred expeditions that transformed Mesoamerican archaeology by unearthing traces of the region's earliest complex societies and exploring an unstudied area that turned out to be a crucial cultural crossroads. Even today, the institute he founded hums with research. But proof of Mormon beliefs eluded him. His mission led him further and further from his faith, eventually sapping him of religious conviction entirely. Ferguson placed his faith in the hands of science, not realizing they were the lion's jaws.

But that night, lying in his hammock listening to the rain and the occasional roar of a jaguar in the distance, Ferguson felt surer than ever that Mesoamerican civilizations had been founded by migrants from the Near East, just as his religion had taught him. Now, he thought, how would he convince the rest of the world?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) doesn't take an official position on where the events in the Book of Mormon occurred. But the faithful have been trying to figure it out practically since 1830, when church founder Joseph Smith published what he said was a divinely inspired account of the ancient Americas. Smith said an angel had led him to buried ancient golden plates, which he dug up and translated into the Book of Mormon. Smith's account of buried wonders was one of many in the United States at the time. As white settlers moved west, they encountered mounds filled with skeletons and artifacts, including beautiful pottery and ornaments. Newspapers, including those in Smith's hometown of Palmyra, New York, buzzed with speculation about who the "mound builders" were and how they came by their refined culture. Many settlers, blinded by racism, concluded that the mound builders—now known to be indigenous farming societies—were a lost people who had been exterminated by the violent ancestors of Native Americans. The Book of Mormon, with its saga of righteous, white Nephites and wicked, dark-skinned Lamanites, echoed these ideas.

The Book of Mormon also spoke of sprawling ancient cities, none of which had been identified in the United States. So in the 1840s, Mormons, including Smith himself, took notice of a U.S. explorer's best-selling accounts of visits to the ruins of Mayan cities in Mexico and Guatemala. In 1842, as editor of a Mormon newspaper, Smith published excerpts from a book about the ruins of the Mayan city of Palenque in Mexico, with the commentary: "Even the most credulous cannot doubt ... these wonderful ruins of Palenque are among the mighty works of the Nephites—and the mystery is solved."

But non-Mormons continued to doubt, and church authorities gradually retreated from explicit statements about Book of Mormon locations. By the 1930s, when Ferguson learned about Mesoamerican civilizations as an undergraduate at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, the matter had been largely ceded to amateurs who pored over maps and the Book of Mormon looking for correspondences.

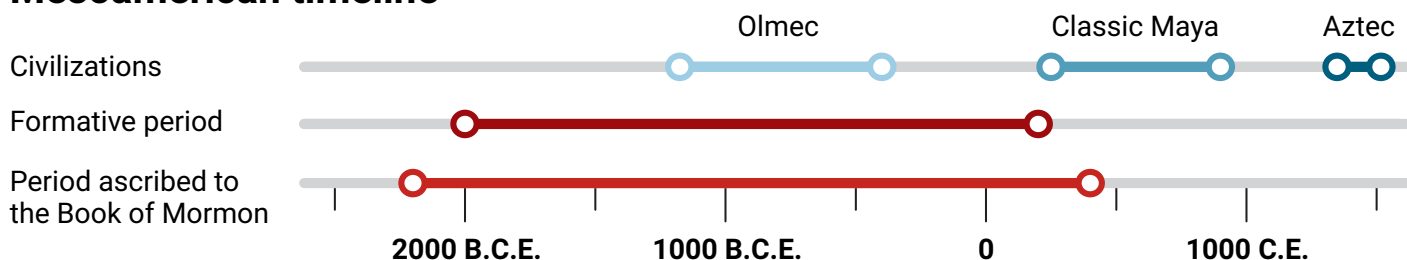
Ferguson wasn't impressed by their efforts. "The interested and inquiring mind of the modern investigator is not satisfied with explanations which are vague, unsound, and illogical," he wrote in an article in a church magazine in 1941. By then he was a law student at UC Berkeley and intrigued by the idea of scientifically testing Smith's revelation. In a later letter, he wrote, "It is the only Church on the face of the earth which can be subjected to this kind of investigation and checking." And in another, to the LDS leadership, he declared, "The Book of Mormon is either fake or fact. If fake, the [ancient] cities described in it are non-existent. If fact—as we know it to be—the cities will be there."

Ferguson's holy land

His quest spurred digs in central and coastal Chiapas in Mexico, previously overlooked in favor of Olmec and Mayan lands.



Mesoamerican timeline



J. YOU/SCIENCE

Tall and handsome, with a lawyer's practiced authority, Ferguson trusted that the tools of science could persuade the world of the truth of the Book of Mormon. Soon after he finished college, he began searching for clues in colonial documents that recorded some of Latin America's indigenous traditions. One, written around 1554 by a group of K'iche' Mayan villagers in the Guatemala highlands, stated that their ancestors—"sons of Abraham and Jacob"—had sailed across a sea to reach their homeland. The K'iche' were defeated by Spanish conquistadors in 1524, and the biblical references were likely the product of contact with Catholic priests, who enthusiastically converted allies and former foes alike.

But Ferguson, who had grown up in a Mormon family in Idaho, eagerly took such syncretism as proof that Israelites had once settled in the Americas. He was also taken by the myth of Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent deity that some colonial priests described as a bearded white man. Ferguson concluded that he was Jesus, appearing in Bountiful after his resurrection just as the Book of Mormon recorded. His library research spurred his first hunt for archaeological evidence, in Campeche in 1948.

Ferguson realized, however, that colonial sources represented circumstantial evidence at best. Nor was it enough to find ruins of past civilizations in more or less the right location, as he had done in Campeche. To persuade and convert outsiders—a priority for Mormons—he sought objects mentioned in the Book of Mormon that archaeologists hadn't found in Mesoamerica: horses, wheeled chariots, steel swords, and, most important, Hebrew or Egyptian script. "The final test of our views of Book of Mormon geography will be archaeological work in the ground itself," Ferguson wrote in 1951 to his friend J. Willard Marriott, the wealthy founder of the Marriott hospitality chain and a powerful figure in the church.

Ferguson's idea that Mesoamerican societies were seeded by Western ones is widely recognized as racist today. But it fit right into the archaeological thinking of the time, when Mesoamerican archaeologists were consumed by the question of whether civilizations had evolved independently in the Americas or had roots elsewhere. "In the 1940s and 1950s, these were the questions everyone was investigating," says Robert Rosenswig, an archaeologist at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Albany.

Ferguson never received a formal education in archaeology. He practiced law to support his growing family—he eventually had five children—as well as his research. But in 1951, he recruited leading archaeologists to explore the origin of Mesoamerican civilization as part of a new institution, the **New World Archaeological Foundation** (NWAf). First on board was renowned researcher Alfred Kidder of Harvard University and the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington, D.C. Kidder thought Mesoamerican civilizations had developed independently, but he and Ferguson had met at a museum in Guatemala City in 1946 and struck up a correspondence.

Kidder "is recognized as the best [Mesoamerican] archaeologist of the 20th century," says archaeologist John Clark of Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah, who directed NWAf from 1987 to 2009. To get Kidder on the project, Clark says, "There's no question that Ferguson had to be some charismatic guy." Also recruited was Gordon Ekholm, an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, who thought that Mesoamerican civilizations had their roots in advanced Asian cultures.



A ritual figurine from the site of Los Horcones is scanned at New World Archaeological Foundation headquarters.

LIZZIE WADE

Their timing was good. Radiocarbon dating had just been invented, and Ferguson immediately recognized its potential for tracing the origins of Mesoamerican cultures. "This is the greatest development since the beginning of archaeology," he wrote to LDS leadership. "I am of the personal opinion that the Lord inspired [radiocarbon dating] that it might be used effectively in connection with the Book of Mormon."

Yet the first years of NWAFF were a desperate scramble for money. Ferguson contributed thousands himself and raised funds from wealthy Mormons and the audiences of his lectures

about Book of Mormon geography. In 1952, NWAf managed to send a handful of U.S. and Mexican archaeologists to survey the drainage basin of the Grijalva River in Tabasco and Chiapas, which Ferguson believed to be the Book of Mormon's River Sidon.

By this point, Ferguson had become more discerning about time periods than he had been in the jungles of Campeche. The ruins he found there were likely Classic or post-Classic Mayan, from between 250 C.E. and the Spanish conquest—much too late to be Mesoamerica's earliest civilization or the period mentioned in the Book of Mormon, believed to be about 2200 B.C.E. to 400 C.E. "We'll never solve pre-Maya origins by digging up more Mayas," Ferguson wrote to Kidder in April 1953. They needed Formative period sites, dating from about 2000 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., roughly matching the dates associated with the Book of Mormon.

In May 1953, Ferguson arrived in Chiapas to lend a hand. "He was rather alarmed that we hadn't found anything notable, because he felt he had to have something pretty spectacular to go and get more money for another year," recalls John Sorenson, then a master's student in archaeology at BYU (and a Mormon). To jump-start the search, Ferguson chartered a small plane, and he and Sorenson flew over the lush lowlands of central Chiapas. Fifteen kilometers southeast of the state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, they spotted the mounds and plazas of the ancient site of **Chiapa de Corzo**—which was then unknown to archaeologists. Later NWAf excavations dated the city to the Formative period.

Back on the ground, Ferguson and Sorenson set out by jeep for a 10-day survey to see what else they could find. "We'd go from site to site, town to town, asking 'Are there any ruins around here?'" says Sorenson, who went on to receive a Ph.D. in anthropology from UC Los Angeles (UCLA) and is now a professor emeritus at BYU. Ferguson also asked locals whether they had found figurines of horses—unknown in ancient Mesoamerica—or sources of iron ore, which Sorenson found naïve. But his own archaeological training paid off, and at some sites he was able to identify the polished, monochrome pottery and hand-sculpted, irregular human figurines of the Formative period, so different from the intricate but standardized figurines the Classic Maya had made from molds. In all, Sorenson and Ferguson surveyed 22 sites on that journey and collected an astounding number of Formative artifacts. "In my humble opinion there is little or no question about it—they are Nephite making," Ferguson wrote to his church funders.

In 1954, LDS authorities granted NWAf \$250,000 for 5 years of work. Intensive excavations at Chiapa de Corzo uncovered stone pyramids and tombs, and a wealth of pottery that impressed University of Pennsylvania anthropologist John Alden Mason, then working with NWAf. "Since pre-Classic pottery is not very common anywhere, and that of this region is entirely new, it is of course a very great scientific contribution," Mason wrote to Ferguson. Eventually, archaeologists reported that the site was settled around 1200 B.C.E., likely by people connected to the Olmec, an early civilization that dominated the gulf coast of Mexico from 1200 B.C.E. to 400 B.C.E., centuries before the Classic Maya arose.



Stela 5 from Izapa in Mexico—an early site first extensively excavated by New World Archaeological Foundation archaeologists—shows a mythical tree; some Mormons believe it reflects a prophetic dream from the Book of Mormon.

JEAN-PIERRE COURAU/BRIDGEMAN

Then, in the early 1960s, NWAFA archaeologists became the first to extensively excavate at Izapa, near the Chiapas coast and the Guatemalan border. They were drawn to the site in part because of a monument that apparently depicts a myth involving a tree; Ferguson's friend and founder of BYU's archaeology department, M. Wells Jakeman, argued that the carving shows visions received in a dream by the Mormon prophet Lehi. NWAFA archaeologists, some of whom were Mormon, later soundly rebuffed that interpretation. But Izapa turned out to be a key site in the Soconusco, the Pacific coast region from which every Mesoamerican political power, from the Olmec in 1200 B.C.E. to the Aztec empire in the early 1500s C.E., sourced key luxury goods such as cacao and quetzal feathers. NWAFA spearheaded excavations throughout this region. Pottery finds and dates from Izapa and elsewhere formed the basis of the ceramic chronologies for the Formative period that are still used by every archaeologist working in central and coastal Chiapas today.

"They were working in a part of Mesoamerica that was really unknown," says Michael Coe, an

influential Mesoamerican archaeologist and professor emeritus at Yale University who, at the time, was surveying Formative sites just over the border in Guatemala. "NWAFF put it on the map."

But even as NWAFF grew in scientific stature, and was finally assured continued existence when BYU took it over in 1961, Ferguson was quietly becoming frustrated. The smoking gun he had been certain he would find—Egyptian or Hebrew script—proved elusive. He once had promised that archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon would be found within 10 years of NWAFF starting excavations. But in 1966 he wrote, "My number one goal of establishing that Christ appeared in Mexico following the crucifixion will never be achieved until significant ancient manuscript discoveries are made. I hope it happens during our lifetimes."

When an ancient manuscript discovery did come, however, it was from a different quarter of the world—and it shook Ferguson's faith to its core.

In the summer of 1835, Joseph Smith had received a curious visitor in Kirtland, Ohio, then the headquarters of his burgeoning LDS church: a traveling showman, with four Egyptian mummies and some hieroglyphic texts in tow. The church bought the mummies and texts, and Smith said he translated the hieroglyphics, resulting in the Book of Abraham, which lays out Smith's cosmic vision of the afterlife. (Although Egyptian hieroglyphics had been deciphered in France in 1822 with the help of the Rosetta Stone, the news had barely reached U.S. shores.) As Smith and his followers moved around the Midwest, often fleeing angry mobs, they carried the mummies and papyri with them. After Smith's death at the hands of one of those mobs in Nauvoo, Illinois, they were sold by his family.

The fate of the mummies remains a mystery. But in 1966, a University of Utah professor examining artifacts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City came across 11 Egyptian papyri with an 1856 certificate of sale signed by Smith's widow, Emma. The professor realized he was looking at the Book of Abraham papyri, and the documents were returned to the Mormon church.

“ I must conclude that Joseph Smith had not the remotest skill in things Egyptian-hieroglyphics. ”

Thomas Stuart Ferguson, in a 1971 letter

Ferguson learned the news from a frontpage article in the newspaper *Deseret News* on 27 November 1967. Within days, he wrote to a friend in the church leadership, begging to know whether the papyri would be studied. Hearing that no studies were planned, Ferguson, as ever, took matters into his own hands. He received photos of the documents from the church and hired Egyptologists at UC Berkeley to translate them. He told the scholars nothing about the

religious significance of the papyri. "He was conducting a clearly blind test," Clark says.

The results started coming in 6 weeks later. "I believe that all of these are spells from the Egyptian Book of the Dead," UC Berkeley Egyptologist Leonard Lesko wrote to Ferguson. Three other scholars independently gave Ferguson the same result: The texts were authentic ancient Egyptian, but represented one of the most common documents in that culture.

After decades of stressing the importance of the scientific method and using it to shore up his own faith, Ferguson now found himself at its mercy. "I must conclude that Joseph Smith had not the remotest skill in things Egyptian-hieroglyphics," he wrote to a fellow doubting Mormon in 1971. What's more, he wrote to another, "Right now I am inclined to think that all of those who claim to be 'prophets', including Moses, were without a means of communication with deity."

This doubt ultimately spread to Ferguson's archaeological quest. In 1975, he submitted a paper to a symposium about Book of Mormon geography outlining the failure of archaeologists to find Old World plants, animals, metals, and scripts in Mesoamerica. "The real implication of the paper," he wrote in a letter the following year, "is that you can't set Book of Mormon geography down anywhere—because it is fictional."

Although open about his doubts in his private letters, Ferguson didn't discuss his loss of faith with his family. He continued attending church, singing in the choir, and even giving blessings. "[Mormons] are so immersed in that culture ... [that] to lose your faith, it's like you're being expelled from Eden," Coe says. "I felt sorry for him."

Ferguson continued to visit Mexico and from time to time stopped by NWAH headquarters in Chiapas, where he spoke frankly with Clark in 1983. "He resented that he spent so much time trying to prove the Book of Mormon. He said it was a fraud," remembers Clark, who is Mormon. The next month, Ferguson died of a heart attack while playing tennis. He was 67.



At the New World Archaeological Foundation, Richard Lesure studies artifacts from Mesoamerica's earliest complex society.

LIZZIE WADE

On a recent afternoon at NWAf headquarters here, scholars wander among buildings, sheltered patios, and a courtyard brimming with flowers and citrus trees. UCLA archaeologist Richard Lesure sorts through ceramics he excavated 27 years ago at Paso de la Amada on the Chiapas coast, home to Mesoamerica's first known ball court and elite residences. With NWAf support, Lesure has spent nearly 3 decades studying why mobile, egalitarian hunter-gatherers settled down here and created the oldest complex society in Mesoamerica around 1900 B.C.E., before even the Olmec rose to power.

Upstairs, Claudia García-Des Lauriers, an archaeologist at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, watches as an undergraduate student carefully positions an opossum-shaped ceramic whistle in the thin red laser beams of a 3D scanner. The researchers are creating a digital version of the ritual object, which García-Des Lauriers discovered at the Classic period site of Los Horcones on the Chiapas coast. Meanwhile, in the backyard, Clark leads an impromptu flint knapping lesson, using obsidian nodules strewn about the lawn.

"It's such a stimulating place to work," says Janine Gasco, an archaeologist at California State University in Dominguez Hills, who began working with NWAf in 1978. "It's been a force in my life."

In the years after Ferguson drifted away from the church and the foundation, NWAf continued to lead excavations, fund graduate students, publish an impressive amount of raw data, and store archaeological collections. Thanks to its work, a region that once seemed an archaeological backwater compared with the nearby Classic Mayan heartland in the Yucatán, Guatemala, and Belize has been revealed as the birthplace of Mesoamerican civilization and an economic and cultural hot spot, where people from all over the region crossed paths. "We wouldn't know anything about [central and coastal] Chiapas if it wasn't for [NWAf]," García-Des Lauriers says.

"Their work set the stage for everything I've done," says SUNY Albany's Rosenswig, who led recent excavations at Izapa to study the origins of urban life in Mesoamerica. When his graduate student Rebecca Mendelsohn, now a postdoc at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama City, excavated in Izapa in 2014, NWAf's **original map of its mounds and monuments served as a vital field reference**. "I've been surprised at how sound the work from the 1960s still is," she says.

NWAf is still run by BYU, which means its funding comes from the Mormon church and all its directors have been Mormons. But aside from a ban on coffee at headquarters, the archaeologists who work here barely notice its religious roots. "There aren't conversations about religion," Gasco says. "The archaeological community has a lot of respect for the work done here."

Ferguson had hoped the Chiapas coast would turn out to be a crossroads not just for Mesoamerica, but the world. But the more NWAf and its collaborators excavated and analyzed sites in the region, the more they confirmed that Mesoamerican civilization sprang up from entirely New World origins. For archaeologists today, that makes the field all the more exciting. "That's one of the most amazing things about studying Mesoamerican archaeology—it's one of a half-dozen or so cases of independent development of agriculture, development of complexity, development of cities," Rosenswig says.

It is hard to know whether Ferguson would have shared that excitement. For all his trust in science, his goal was to serve his faith. Some believing Mormons still read his books and trust his early, enthusiastic ideas about Mesoamerica. Others who came to doubt their religion also

found hope in his story. His loss of faith gave them conviction and strength as they began their own journey down a difficult road, as shown by many who wrote him anguished letters in his later years.

But it is his scientific legacy, long unrecognized, that is perhaps most significant. "Facts are facts and truth is truth," Ferguson once wrote about the archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon that he was sure was about to be discovered in southern Mexico. His belief in that principle never wavered.

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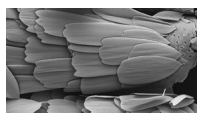


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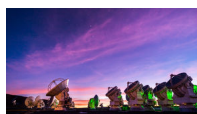
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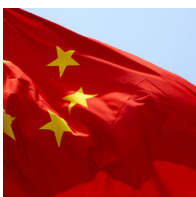
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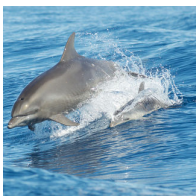
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